

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Scriptures: Colossians 1:15-23; John 1:1-5, 14-18

Believing in God can be destructive. That is the thesis of a new book by Christopher Hitchens called *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The book alternates between sarcasm and bitterness while denouncing every religion you can think of, including the Christian religion. I don't think we'll put this book in our church library, but it has a point. The author describes a radio interview where he was asked this question: If you found yourself in a strange city at dusk with a large group of men approaching, would you feel safer knowing they had just come from a prayer meeting? He answered that in the following cities he would feel less safe: Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad, to name only the cities starting with "B" (p. 18).

It reminds me of a story told by Marge Carpenter, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church. She was in Belfast, Northern Ireland, when a little boy was asked, "Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?" The boy replied, "I'm an atheist." "What is an atheist?" he was asked. He replied, "My momma says that if you're an atheist, you don't get killed by either side" (*To the Ends of the Earth*, p. 58).

That is exactly Christopher Hitchens' point. A lot of killing takes place in the name of religion. He writes,

I once heard the late Abba Eban, one of Israel's more polished and thoughtful diplomats and statesmen, give a talk in New York. The first thing to strike the eye about the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, he said, was the ease of its solubility. ... Two peoples of roughly equivalent size had a claim to the same land. The solution was, obviously, to create two states side by side. Surely something so self-evident was within the wit of man to encompass? And so it would have been, decades ago, if the messianic rabbis and mullahs and priests could have been kept out of it. But the exclusive claims to god-given authority, made by hysterical clerics on both sides and further stoked by Armageddon-minded Christians who hope to bring on the Apocalypse ..., have made the situation insufferable, and put the whole of humanity in the position of hostage to a quarrel that now features the threat of nuclear war. *Religion poisons everything* (author's emphasis, pp. 24-25).

He has a point. Believing in God is not necessarily a good thing. It all depends on the kind of God you believe in.

And that brings me to our scripture reading today from Colossians, chapter 1. In verse 15 Paul says, "He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation." In other words, if you want to know what God is like, if you want to know the real heart of the Power that created the world, you need to look at Jesus.

And if you want to know where the world is headed, if you want to know God's true will for the world, then you must also look at Jesus. Verse 18: "He is the head of the body, the

church; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.” Paul describes Jesus as “the first born of creation” and “the first born from the dead.” In other words, Jesus shows us the God who gave us life and the God who gives us new life, the God who created the world and the God who intends to save the world.

But how does God intend to save the world? By wiping out all God’s enemies? By purging the world of everyone who does not belong to our group? Listen again to verse 19-20:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

To me, Christopher Hitchens’ book is not an argument against God. It is an argument against false gods—gods that people create in their own image to support their own self-centered agenda. Unfortunately that is also possible to do with Jesus. Sometimes people create Jesus in their own image. They make Jesus into the patron saint of their own group or ideology.

A while back this little piece was emailed to me. It is called “Jesus: A Modern Perspective.”

There were 3 good arguments that Jesus was Black: 1) he called everyone brother, 2) he liked gospel, and 3) he couldn’t get a fair trial.

But then there were 3 equally good arguments that Jesus was Jewish: 1) he went into his father’s business, 2) he lived at home until he was 33, and 3) his mother was sure he was God.

But then there were 3 equally good arguments that Jesus was Italian: 1) he talked with his hands, 2) he had wine with his meals, and 3) he used olive oil.

But there were also 3 good arguments that Jesus was from California: 1) he never cut his hair, 2) he walked around barefoot, and 3) he started a new religion.

But the most compelling evidence of all is 3 proofs that Jesus was a woman: 1) he fed a crowd at a moment’s notice when there was no food, 2) he kept trying to get a message across to a bunch of men who just didn’t get it, and 3) even when he was dead, he had to get up because there was work to do.

It is easy to make Jesus into our own image. In the old comedy show *All in the Family* Archie Bunker, the resident bigot, was informed by his Polish son-in-law that Jesus was Jewish. Glaring at him Archie replied, “Jesus was no Jew. Jesus was as good a Christian as I am.”

That is a scary thought. It is easy to make Jesus into our own image, to make Jesus the patron of our own self-interest, but that is precisely what we must not do. For Jesus is not an empty vessel into which we can pour our own ideas of what God should be like. Jesus is a flesh and blood human being who lived in the first century and died for us on a cross. Verse 20: “... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

The one undeniable historical truth about Jesus is that Jesus did not try to defeat his enemies by killing them, he tried to reconcile them by dying for them. Christopher Hitchens is right that a lot of killing has been done in the name of Jesus. But it was not the true human historical Jesus they were following. The true human historical Jesus did not kill people. He died for them. Any group—whether it is medieval crusaders slaying Muslims or New England settlers burning witches or Protestants killing Catholics in Ireland, or vice versa—any group that sets out to wipe out another group in the name of Jesus is not acting in the name of Jesus. They are acting in the name of an idol—a Jesus of their own making.

It is supposed to work the other way around. Jesus did not come so that we could make God in our image. Jesus came so that we could be made into God's image. In Romans 8:29 the apostle Paul says, "For those whom (God) foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." There is that word "firstborn" again. Jesus came to earth as the image of God in order that we might become the true images of God that we were meant to be.

Later in Colossians 3:10-11, a passage we will study next week, Paul says,

Clothe yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarians, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all in all!

Notice the connection between these two verses. To clothe ourselves in God's image does not mean to separate ourselves from other people or to kill them. It means to be joined with other people into a larger family. Many people in history have used the name of Jesus to attack others and destroy them. But that is not what Jesus did. True faith does not try to make Jesus like us, it tries to make us like Jesus; because he is the image of the invisible God and the only hope we have of peace.

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