

“In the Beginning,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 1/4/26

Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

We hear a description of the Word. The Greek term is *Logos*, which can mean “word” or it can mean “reason” or it can mean “order.” God and the Word might be distinguished between that which creates and that which sets in place, that which organizes.

*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and life was the light of all people.*

God is the creator of all things. This is not a surprising idea, I imagine, for many of you, but I can also imagine that it is not an idea that you bring to mind that terribly often. Why? Because it is hard to do so. It is hard to envision what creation means. How everything started. How everything got to this moment in time. We are reminded of this in this very passage.

*No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*

Now for any close readers of the Bible out there, this might seem to be a mistake. When you read the Book of Genesis, for example, God seems to meet with and speak with a few people. Adam and Eve. Their son Cain. Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Elijah. In some of these cases we might quibble and say that someone only spoke to God, or encountered God, like Elijah hearing the still small voice in the wilderness. They did not *see* God.

There is a theme in the Bible about how someone would die if they were to see God. Moses asks to see God and is only allowed to see his back. God actually hides Moses in a cleft in a rock to protect the prophet from the full visage of God. In case you ever wondered about the hymn lyric, “Rock of ages cleft for me,” there you have it.

And so, here is a challenge for those who believe in God. Seeing God is beyond us, Adam and Eve notwithstanding. We could get a glimpse of God like Moses, but I am guessing that is not in everyone’s experience. Even hearing God might overwhelm the typical person, as we saw with the angels visiting the poor shepherds during the Nativity story.

Now I do not know if anyone would truly die if they saw God. I think of this in a different way. It is not that we must not see God, but that we *cannot* see God. That does not mean God is invisible, but that we are simply unable to comprehend God.

Over the next few months leading into the season of Lent, we will be considering questions from the realm of theology. Theology meaning the study of the nature of God and religious belief. And so today, I wanted to start at the beginning, so to speak, and consider the nature of God.

I am going to assume for a moment that the people gathered here today believe in God. If not, you have a strange morning ahead for you as I ramble on about it.

Theology was once the central focus of study in European universities. It was the king of the sciences, the most important thing you could study that led to everything else. That has changed over time for reasons that I might get into during the coming weeks. But for now, I wanted to

note the change and to offer my thoughts about what a truly daunting task it was to consider the nature of God. And that is not merely my observation, but a longstanding tradition within Christianity.

In the early Christian church, God was never depicted. No paintings, no sculptures. That was likely in deference to this morning's reading about how only Jesus, in his role as the Logos, has seen God. European art would evolve over the centuries on this topic.

Sometimes the hand of God would be shown. Sometimes symbols would be substituted, like the *chi-ro*, the familiar symbol with the letter "P" with a letter "X" superimposed over it. That symbol means "Christ" and so we might wonder about how we can distinguish between God as the Father and the Creator versus God as the Son and the Logos. We could spend the next twenty years doing that, honestly, so I will try to be brief.

One of the reasons I think Christianity focuses so much on Jesus and his role as Christ, the anointed one, is that it is easier to understand Jesus than it is to understand God. Jesus is an approachable figure. God is not. God is too much, beyond our capabilities to understand.

Let's consider an example. I am guessing that many of you have been to the ocean. I grew up next to the Atlantic, so it is a familiar place for me. But being familiar with the ocean is not the same as comprehending the ocean, the vastness and power of the ocean. Usually, we see the ocean in some smaller way. We are at the beach, enjoying the sea and sun. Maybe we are out on a boat, sailing nimbly along with the wind or being carried along by the boat's own power. Perhaps we are in an airplane over the water, seeing the ocean spread from horizon to horizon.

Each of those experiences expands how much of the ocean we can see. The little bit we can spy from our beach towel. The wider vista of being out on open water. And then the vast expanse of the ocean viewed from far above. Bigger and bigger yet.

But even that is far less than the whole. Try imagining the *entire* ocean. Every inlet off the coasts of Maine and Norway. Every island in the Pacific and the Great Barrier Reef off the shores of Australia. The Marianas trench two miles below the surface in eternal darkness. Try to hold all of that in your head.

But wait there is more. Now add every sea creature. Every fish, every bird, every whale. Every piece of seaweed, every bit of plankton. Every sea going vessel, every tiny boat, every giant tanker, everywhere around the world. Try to imagine all of that in your head and it will likely overwhelm your imagination.

And that is only the ocean. Not the surface of the Earth. Not the mountains and plains, not the cities and towns, not the animals and plants and many, many other aspects of the world we live in. The world is beyond our mind's ability to fathom it in any one moment.

But I can keep going. Imagine the sun. Imagine the planets. Imagine the solar system. Imagine the next star if you can. Imagine the neighboring galaxy if you are able. Imagine the dark spaces between galaxies that we can barely perceive or understand. Imagine the universe in all its complexities and undiscovered mysteries.

I am guessing some of you gave up on that mental journey into the greatness around us.

But I can keep going. In the other direction. Down to the size of a cell in our bodies. To the molecules. To the underlying atoms. To the neutrons and photons and electrons. You probably cannot imagine those because no one really has a good way of picturing those ever-smaller pieces of the stuff around us. And they are still not the smallest parts.

We make guesses as to what they might look like, but we usually round it off to the imaginations of physicists explaining it all to us. And all that science, all that seemingly rational explanation of the universe, the infinite and the infinitesimal, we take on faith. We take common descriptions of the universe around us on faith.

In the Christian tradition, like many religious traditions, God is thought to be greater than the universe. Larger and more awe-inspiring than all that I have just attempted to describe. How can anything that immense, that complex, fit into our brains? It does not fit.

And so, when John tells us that no one has seen God, I can embrace the sentiment. No one has seen God. No one has seen God in all that God entails, at least as Christians and others currently define God. God is beyond us.

Over the centuries, however, God has been defined differently. Human beings came to fear the world around them and, to conquer that fear, they tried to understand and to explain the world. We feared the storm, we feared the ocean, we feared fire. And so, we stared back at those fears and developed ways of approaching them, of telling stories to help us explain away our fears.

The vastness of the sky and the ocean, the destructive power of fire and storms, each of these were interpreted through stories. Stories in which we explain how we might avoid the more destructive aspects of those terrifying elements of the world around us. Stories about how and why things happen.

Those stories help us to go about our day without being perpetually afraid of everything. Because human beings, unlike animals, do not primarily rely upon inborn instincts to survive. There is some of that, like getting hungry and thirsty. But the success of human beings as a species comes more from our ability to communicate. To convey information about the world around us and to preserve that information across the generations. We learn and we teach and we remember.

We tell stories.

Religions were often tied closely to the places people lived. You had local gods who you prayed to for rain or for good fortune or for whatever in the immediate vicinity. Sometimes gods were specialized, like Zeus ruling over the sky and Poseidon the ocean. But often they were about places or people.

The God of Israel was in many respects a god of a place and a people, at least as set forth in the older stories of the Bible. That sense of God changes over the centuries, and the localized nature of the God of Israel gives way to an all-encompassing role and presence for God. This happens for many reasons, one of which is that people did not spend the entirety of their lives living in that one place, Israel, as the centuries passed.

But even then, even as God became more comprehensive and monotheism took hold in much of the world, people still tried to make God more approachable, more familiar. Because like our mental exercise trying to imagine the whole ocean or the entire universe at once, we sometimes are more worried than we are comforted by the vastness of God as God is often described.

How would they do that? By telling stories.

In the Catholic tradition, for example, people hear the stories of the saints, people who the church decided have been taken up into heaven. That is all a saint really is, someone who made it into heaven. As such, saints take on smaller roles in comparison to God the Creator of all things.

My personal saintly favorite is Saint Anthony who you pray to when you lose something – that is a common worry at my stage in life. If you are worried about someone who is traveling, you might say a prayer to Saint Christopher, depicted here in our own church.

Or Saint Jude who is one of the big guns, the patron saint of lost causes. The saint you turn to when you are in desperate need. Is it any wonder that Saint Jude's Hospital in Tennessee is dedicated to treating life threatening diseases in children? For Saint Jude is the saint of last hopes.

Many Protestants do not look to the saints in this sense. Some do not have saints and some even call themselves saints, like the Puritans and the Mormons. The veneration of the saints is occasionally referred to as idolatrous because you are not worshipping God directly. But I see it as a way of embracing the divine without overwhelming our minds with the enormity of God.

You might notice an interesting aspect of many Protestant prayers. Protestants do not typically pray directly to God. They pray to Jesus. They will often end their prayers in Jesus' name or maybe with an invocation of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Why the difference? Is it stylistic or something more profound?

There might be any number of reasons for this, by tradition or by preference. But I think that part of it has to do with approachability. Again, it is hard to hold the fullness of God in your mind. So, there are ways of paring God down to size to make everything seem a bit less overwhelming, because really that is a core purpose of religion – to make everything less overwhelming. And so, when we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, it is in once sense an accommodation of our human imaginations.

I must confess that I do not typically pray in Jesus' name, personally or publicly. That is a personal preference to be sure, but it is also an element of my personal sense of theology, how I understand the nature of God. My sense of prayer is not only about reaching out toward God. It is also a way of reorienting myself and others toward the goals of the prayer and making an inner place for God.

When I pray to God for peace, I am also reminding myself to strive for peace in my life. When I pray to God for strength, I am preparing myself to be resolute in the face of what might come. When I pray to God for guidance, I am alerting myself to be aware, to hone my senses for what might be useful or instructive or needful in the coming days. Part of prayer is to reach out toward God. But the other part of prayer is to open ourselves to the nature and influence of God.

As I have described God this morning, God may come across as very grand, very vast, very over the top. And that is one way of imagining God. God as God the transcendent, as God beyond the ken of we mere mortals. But we might think of God in another way, as God the adjacent, as God the ever-present, as God lying around each and every corner.

When I described the ocean as being far more than just the local beach, that scale of perception can be put in reverse. The vastness of the ocean can be felt in the beauty of that smaller scale.

On New Year's Eve this past week, I performed a wedding and the venue looked out over Boston Harbor. It was nighttime, but I could still see the boats in the harbor, the lights on the distant shore, the lights of my hometown. The ocean was there in front of me even as the ocean circled the world, touching every island, every river, every continent. The ocean is enormous but it was also right there, right next to me.

And when I take a walk in the woods or listen to the wind in the trees or hear snow falling softly, each of those small wonders connects me to the greater wonder of the world around me and to the greatest wonder that is God in the world. For God is the creator and God is present in creation. In the ocean, huge and imposing, but also in the dandelion growing out of the concrete sidewalk, in the squirrel running up into the tree. In the world around us and on the street where we live.

According to the Gospel of John, no one has seen God. And that is true in a sense. No one has likely imagined the fullness of God with any accuracy, as creation unfolds into the cosmos and down to the smallest fragment of reality. And yet, we can encounter God in the stillness like Elijah after the storm. We can encounter God in the wonder and the terror of nature, like Job facing the whirlwind. We can encounter God in the beauty of creation, like Adam and Eve walking through the Garden of Eden.

How we encounter God is a personal reflection on the world around us. Where we find wonder, where we discover beauty, where we look with a sense of curiosity. That is where God lies, even if God is far more than that small piece of creation.

We can find God around every corner, if we are looking with eyes open to that possibility and if we are listening with ears attuned to the stillness that can be God. To the presence of God in every part of world. And the presence of God that meets us where we are in the moment, always and forever. Amen.