



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
29 July 2018
Sermon: "Mirror Image"
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John 6:1-15
2 Samuel 11:1-15

One photograph. I returned home from Poland about a week ago and I have not been able to get one photograph out of my mind. It is a small, 4x6 black and white image, hanging amongst many on the wall at the Polish-Jewish museum in Warsaw.

The photo was taken in 1943 in the Warsaw Jewish ghetto at the end of the historic uprising. On the ground, in front of a brick wall sit a row of Jewish-Polish civilians preparing to be killed. Some cling to one another, some are frozen with mouths wide open, some look sternly straight ahead, some stare at the cameraman snapping the photo.

Across from them stands a Nazi soldier holding a rifle in his right hand. But strange, his rifle isn't pointed at them. Rather, in this moment it is aimed at the ground. Even more peculiar, the soldier is not even looking at the group that sits before him. His whole body is twisted in the other direction.

I've been thinking non-stop about this image. Not only have I been haunted by the faces of those innocent lives in their final moments, but I have also been thinking *a lot* about this soldier.

In this critical, chaotic moment, it would have made sense for him to be watching his captives closely (*right?*), making sure none try to fight back or escape. But in this photograph, the soldier's rifle is pointed down, his body is turned around. And so, we are left wondering...

Why is he looking away?
Could it be that there is something that he does not want to see?

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As people of faith, we talk a great deal about being "made in the image of God" (*b'tzelem Elohim* in Hebrew). We love to tell the story of how God formed the earth with just words and breath. And from dust and side, God sculpted the human frame. And God called it all good.

But these days, it can be hard to recognize God's goodness moving about in all things. We are more accustomed to seeing images on the news that jar our faith, hearing rhetoric that overpower God's voice, learning about policies that directly harm God's creation, facing our own disappointments that blur our vision of the Holy One.

All of these painful images leave us wondering if God is really at work among us - within us - even now. Surely, we can find ourselves, more times than not, needing to look away from the world's troubles, to differentiate ourselves from one another, to downplay the severity of our shortcomings - all in order to try to salvage God's reflection in the mirror.

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King David knew what it was like to feel like a holy reflection of God. His life was the quintessential underdog story. The Lord took this young shepherd and empowered him to defeat the giant Goliath, chose him to take up the thrown, watched him carry the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, and dance like “no one’s watching” in praise to God.

We love to lift up this wholesome image of David where God seems to be reflected in his every move. But today’s text blurs that image in a big way.

Today, something has broken inside David. This is something that we don’t expect, something that we don’t want to see. He stays behind from the battle and soon finds himself wrapped up in another dangerous situation. Adultery, Coercion, Abusive power, Murder. David is at the center of it all.

After getting Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba pregnant, David does everything in his power to salvage his own image. He commands Uriah to return to lie down with his wife (and cover David’s tracks); he gets Uriah drunk hoping that this will do the trick; and then finally, when all else fails, he calls for his faithful servant to be put in harm’s way on the battlefield – so that Uriah can die and David can claim his wife, Bathsheba as his own. *What?!?*

We want so badly to avert our eyes from this “fall from grace” David. His actions don’t seem fitting for one made in God’s holy image. Why did our ancestors choose to keep this part of his life alive in our Bible? Why not simply rip it out or tuck it away where no one can see?

For centuries, readers, teachers and preachers have tried to do just that. Yes, more disturbing that David’s actions have been the ways we have tried to cover up, rationalize, downplay this story.

There are writings that scapegoat Bathsheba, claiming that she must have been a temptress who led David astray.

Others have tried to rationalize David’s actions, claiming that Uriah must have been an abusive husband and David was actually seeking to rescue Bathsheba.

Others still have attempted to romanticize the story, claiming that David and Bathsheba shared a love akin to Cleopatra and Marc Anthony – and even God was moved to unite them.

Truth be told, none of these explanations should sit well with us. David is entangled in a cruel situation, and we should not simply try to see him with rose-colored glasses.

If we are people who truly claim to believe that we are all made in God’s image, then we have to look closely at what that *really* means. David is far from perfect, and so are we. Knowing this, what then does it mean to be “made in the image of God?”

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The Medieval Jewish philosopher, Maimonides once pointed out that *b'tzelem Elohim* “made in the image of God” should not be interpreted to mean that we are physical replicas of God (we

don't have the Lord's high cheek bones or dark-curly hair). Rather, we are created in God's "likeness."

We each possess in us God's essence, God's capacity to create for good. Our bodies then are our God-given tools for doing the Lord's sacred work in the world. But how then, in all of our differences, in all of our shortcomings, can we all claim to have access to a "divine essence?"

The answer is tricky. Like David, none of us are destined to follow paths that are perfect and unbroken. We are sinful and selfish. We slip and we fall. We forget and we turn a blind eye. Yet God remains steadfast and God calls us to holy self-reflection.

When we recognize our shortcomings instead of run from them, when we look directly at what is evil instead of look away from it, we awaken this "divine essence," this grace, this holiness within. To put it simply, to be made in the Lord's image is to have the capacity and the faith to recognize that we are broken and we need God.

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While traveling through Poland, my family and I had the chance to visit one of Oscar Schindler's old factories that has now been converted into a museum. Schindler's story of course became popular in the Steven Spielberg classic *Schindler's List*.

Schindler was a German industrialist and a member of the Nazi party who is credited with saving the lives of nearly twelve hundred Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his factories.

When we began our tour, I quickly expressed my reverence for Schindler's heroism to our tour group. Our guide cut me off: "Schindler wasn't exactly the altruistic man that people think he was. No, he was money-hungry and selfish. His decision to help the Jews was something that happened later, over time. At first, he just wanted to keep his factories open and money pouring in."

Her words struck a chord. Schindler was by no means a saint, like King David, he too was deeply flawed. She reminded me that at some point along the way, Schindler had reflected on his own brokenness and the brokenness around him. By opening his eyes wider, he also opened himself up to his own "divine essence." God forged a new path for his life, and his efforts saved a great many lives.

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Expressing our need for God is not as easy as we think. Looking around the room, I know that we feel the weight of today's troubles heavy on our shoulders. Whether it be the latest headline or the headline in our own lives, the world is certainly badly in need of God, but has difficulty saying so.

With this said, being made God's image is not only about *expressing* our need for the Lord in the midst of our brokenness, but it is about *striving* to live into our "God-given, moral potential."

B'tzelem Elohim can also be translated as we are "made in the image of *the angels*." God is constantly readying us, shaping us, teaching us, challenging us to go out and live as reflections of God's goodness. To be made in the Lord's image, is to believe that God sees us - for all that we

are and all that we can be. Broken, God lifts us up and calls us out to be agents of healing and wholeness. Just as God could see that potential in David, before and after all that he did, God too sees our potential and nudges us to chase after what is good.

I love the way Rabbi Arthur Green puts it: “We are created in the image of God, so we are obliged to return the favor.” He continues, “God calls us forth to share an unceasing flow of love, generosity of spirit, and full acceptance, both of ourselves and of all God’s creatures.”ⁱ

As Christians, we have the perfect guide to teach us how to live as “God’s angels” here and now. Jesus (God in the flesh) spent his last night on earth teaching his disciples to live into their potential: to wash feet, share supper, welcome in the outcast, heal the sick, share the sort of compassion that can dismantle barriers and unify us all.

Christ broke his own body, to set ours free. Christ offered us new life so that we can look in the mirror and see God face staring back, calling us to reach out like never before.

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While visiting the historic Jewish cemetery in Krakow, my family and I noticed a young Hassidic Jewish man lost in prayer. When he finished praying, he did something unexpected. He turned to us and said “Hello.” *Now, I don’t know if you know this, but my family and I love to talk, so this just opened up a whole can of worms.*

“We have lots of questions, my father said, “We don’t want to bother you with them.”

“I have lots of questions too, he said. “Ask away.”

We learned that this man, whose name is Asher, lives in Canada. His grandfather died in the Holocaust and he was here in Poland to pay his respects on the anniversary of his grandfather’s murder.

“When you think about all of the innocent lives that were lost in the Holocaust, how does that impact your faith?” I asked.

“It doesn’t,” he said.

“It doesn’t?!?!?”

“No, not at all. I know that God is good. No matter how terrible any situation, God still finds a way to keep working for good. Even if it is a small moment, God is a part of it.”

Another question: “How come God hasn’t just given up on us? We humans mess up all the time.”

Asher laughs, “I believe that God loves us like a one-hundred-year-old parent and you are God’s first born child. There is nothing you can do, nothing the world can do, for God to stop loving you and using you for His purpose.”

“But what if we fall short of who God wants us to be?”

Asher leans in close. “Just do your best. God does not want you to be me or me to be you. God sees you for who you are – and God wants you to be the greatest version of yourself that you can be. That’s all.”

I don’t know why or how Asher, this young man of faith, came into our lives that afternoon, but he reminded me that being “made in God’s image” is not only about our own divine kinship with our creator, it is also about being about to recognize God’s face in one another – in and our friends, in our enemies, in the strangers we meet.

Truly, as God’s own, we are meant to help each other live into the greatness that God sees in each of us.

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...I wonder why the Nazi soldier in that old photograph in Warsaw was looking away from the group of Jewish people that he held captive. I wonder if he did not look because he was too afraid of what he might see.

Perhaps in their eyes he would catch a glimpse of shared humanity.
Perhaps in their faces he would see his own broken reflection.
Perhaps in them he would see God. And so, he turns away.

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In these troubled times, we can never be afraid to look at what is most difficult in the world - and in ourselves. King David was not the image of perfection. And neither are we. We make terrible mistakes. Maybe that’s why it is so important to preserve David’s story as it is.

Friends, we cannot hide the truth about who we are.
God recognizes us, knows us, needs us.
And God keeps loving us and calling us together - no matter what.

B'tzelem Elohim “to be made in God’s image” means...
we name what is broken,
we follow where we are called,
we reach out like never before.

God is here – among us, within us, and before us.
May we have the courage to open our eyes and see.
May we have the faith to be reflections of God’s goodness wherever we go.

ⁱ Erica Brown “In God’s Image: B’tselem Elohim.” My Jewish Learning. 2018.
www.myjewishlearning.com/article/created-in-gods-image/.