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The Episcopal Church of St. Benedict
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John 21:1-19

Someone asked me once, “What is your image of God?”

And I was stumped.

When I was little, my image of God was a sort of faded portrait of George Washington!

But I didn’t really have an image of God any more. Or not just one, anyway.

Maybe you have a strong image of God. Maybe you don’t.

Maybe you have more than one image.

I think for many of us, the earliest images we see of God stick with us, and tell us something about the face of God we were taught first.

Sometimes the image of God we have is the right one for us, and sometimes we hold onto an image that might be harmful or uninspiring.

There are many images of God.

The Bible has an incredible variety: from an angry War God, to Lady Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, to the burning bush in the story of Moses.

In the reading from Acts today, Saul experiences God in the voice of Christ – which blinds him with a blast of light and knocks him off his feet.

In Revelation, Christ is a lamb on a throne.

In the gospel of John, the disciples meet Jesus on the beach at Galilee, where he fills their nets with fish and makes breakfast for them.

As Christians, the truest images of God for us are in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the window to us of God's face, God's presence, God's ways.

In Jesus, God is still mysterious, powerful, and distant – like the images of God in the Old Testament,

and yet Jesus is also close, touchable, and even like a friend.

I like the image of God as someone who grills breakfast for me on the beach!

Someone familiar and comfortable, like an old friend, or someone's really cool mom.

And yet just when I think that this Jesus is like a buddy and I'm wanting another serving of breakfast – he starts asking me questions and telling me to feed his sheep, and I remember that before I came ashore, my nets were mysteriously filled to bursting with fish... this is no ordinary friend. This is not someone whose primary purpose is to make me breakfast.

This is a friend who wants to change the world with me.

That's the thing about the Resurrection.

Jesus is no longer just a teacher, just a really good person who we should all try to be like.

Jesus is someone who is still alive. Jesus is God, living in a form we can talk to, yes, but also full of challenge and strangeness for us.

That's the power of Jesus as THE image of God for us.

Sure, we can see God in the ocean, the sky, in a dog, our family members and friends, in those places we see God's beauty, God's mystery, and God's love for us.

But for Christians, the image of God in Christ asks a little bit more of us.

How have you experienced the image of God in Jesus Christ in your life?

What bible stories stand out to you most vividly?

Are there movies that have formed your image of Jesus in a powerful way?

Have you ever noticed what your image of Jesus is like – how much of a picture is he, and how much is he a living presence for you?

is he the same race as you? what combination of strange and familiar is he for you?

What does your primary image of Jesus say about your primary image of God?

The story of Saul – who later is known by the name Paul – is one of the most dramatic stories of experiencing God through an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Not all of us get to have experiences like this – I hope I'm not setting the bar too high here!

Paul was the great Christian missionary and letter-writer. He was a bit proud and extremely passionate, but first he was a man who persecuted the followers of Christ.

He stood in the crowd and watched his peers stone Stephen to death.

He went searching for Christ-followers, to arrest them for blasphemy.

And yet, Jesus appeared to him! It's a sort of case-book conversion experience:

a light shines, Saul is thrown on his hands and knees, a voice speaks, and Saul's life is completely changed.

Like Paul, we can only know Jesus after the Resurrection.

But then, that's the whole point of the Resurrection – Jesus is alive! Jesus walks among us. Maybe you won't see him at the beach this summer but there are ways he appears to us – ways that we meet him, if we pay attention, if we're willing to believe that it's possible.

Then again, for all I know, some of you may already have run into Jesus many times and are old hands at this stuff.

But perhaps the most important thing is not whether or not we have seen Jesus in a tangible way, necessarily, but how following him and worshipping him have made a difference in our lives.

For Saul, the point was not experiencing Jesus, but how it changed his life.

Actually, the only story we have of Paul's conversion is this passage from Acts – it wasn't important enough to Paul to include as a story in any of his letters, at least not the ones that we still have.

It was more important to Paul to talk about how that experience shaped his life and his relationship with other people.

How we see God and how we know Jesus are important.

But more important, is how our images and relationships with God and Christ shape our lives and how we live as Christians.

Jesus makes breakfast for the disciples on the beach, he fills their nets with fish, he's glad to see them – but how does the story end?

Not with a big bear hug, but a question: what next?

He asks Peter, "Do you love me, Peter?" And Peter says yes, three times.

And Jesus says, three times: Feed my sheep.

Take care of my people.

See me, know me, know God, and now go and do the work God has given you to do.

And may the images of we have of God and Christ

not scare us, or bore us, or make us too comfortable,

but fascinate us, inspire us, and challenge us,

so that we can feel Jesus' call to go and serve and feed other people.

Amen.