

God Is a Young Adult, Growing Younger

Heb 1:1-3

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No one has ever seen God, say the scriptures. We still want to. It's only natural. We want to know reality, all the way down. That's good because God the Hidden One wishes to stay obscure, arcane, ineffable. Jewish Kabbalists depicted Yahweh as a man, even going into carnal detail about God's body parts. (And this was even before the Gospel of John convinced us God had a body, mind you.) Scripture dares metaphor—God the Rock, Mighty Warrior, Mother Hen, the pursuing, overwrought Lover in evening in a fragrant garden, mighty wind who makes oaks to whirl, Good Shepherd, King of Kings, Bloody Lamb, Woman tearing her house apart searching for one lost coin.

Everyone knows not to take such poetry literally. These are metaphors, meant literally “to shine light” on the incarnate/invisible God.

But what if Freud, Marx, and Marcus Borg are wrong? What if these names, these metaphors are not solely constructed by us, not our feeble human wish projection? What if (as Karl Barth said) some of these metaphors, maybe all of them for all we know, *are given by God*, gifts of God's relentless self-disclosure, tireless self-revelation? I invite you to see God through the metaphor that God once gave us. Emmanuel. Joshua. In all sorts of ways God spoke to us, but now God has spoken to us as a young adult (Heb. 1:1).

God is a young adult just getting started, perpetually in his early thirties, launched, but not quite, forever young. I can imagine that's a jarring, unwelcomed thought for many, particularly if you are a young woman who has had difficulty with immature men. And what about me? An aging male who feels a threat when around young adult males, a sense of menace.

If you think you have come up with a comfortable, agreeable metaphor for God that works for you—think again. We are inveterate idolaters.

I've searched the scriptures: Jesus says nothing to people my age. I'm offended. True, Luke begins with a couple of old people hanging out at church, Elizabeth, Zachariah, but then sends them back to the home after their bit parts in the beginning of the story of Jesus, never to be heard from again. These Lukan seniors do what people my age ought to do for people under thirty—get out of the way so they can have a good job!

God, the One who hung the heavens and flung the planets in their courses, is a young man, just barely adult, innocent, bright eyed, alert, nervous, edgy, and at the peak of his powers. He could do with a shave and a shower.

On Pentecost, the Church's birthday, someone had too much to drink, according to the scoffing mob out in the street. Some of the furniture got tossed about in the upper room, there was the scent of smoke (is that burning hemp?), and everybody began to shout, shake, rattle and roll—all against house regulations. That's what you sometimes get, I found as a college chaplain, when the kids plan the party.

God is a young adult who may be ADD in his inability to sit still, though I don't

think he's ever been properly diagnosed. Watch his legs constantly bouncing nervously when everyone else in the room is satisfied to sit still. In his bounding and rocking, he has the demeanor of a twelve year old, not a person of thirty.

Eager, attentive, marveling as if everything is new and awesome, as if all the facts and figures of science, the ancient plays of Shakespeare, a tree full of figs, a seed germinating and taking root, and the poetry of Isaiah were fresh and first time and for his joy alone. One of his best stories is about two boys his age who were both, though in different ways, the father's pain in the neck. Why am I not surprised that so many of his stories end with parties, one a party with the lame, the maimed, and the blind—people with whom we wouldn't be caught dead on a Saturday night?

He walks too fast, this post-adolescent. He invites us. Heck, he invites everybody to walk with him, to join him on an adventure, a road trip to God knows where. We have trouble keeping up with his breathless pace. Along the way, he notices things we have, in our maturity and experience, stopped noticing: a poor beggar, a widow's coin, a wild lily, a disordered child. He also calls our attention, as people his age are wont to do, to the mistakes of pompous, self-important adults, and was saddened by the injustices of people in power. He once called the President a "fox." He said in public that no one goes in the Kingdom of God but kids and that rich people are virtually impossible to be saved. But with God, well, anything's possible.

With age and increasing experience, we thought, he will be just like us. He'll learn. He'll change his tune. He'll mature. Settle down. We thought wrong. Like all those who are beginning, he is obsessed with the future. With him, it's all tomorrow. Tradition plays not as large a role in his worldview as we would have liked.

God is a young adult for whom friends are everything. He invites, embraces even those whom he hardly knows. He loves to hang out with his buddies and tends to make most everyone his buddy, particularly those who are "buddy" to no one. Loves to roam, careening from one party to the next where there is too much drinking and the wine runs out and miraculously overflows, and then to move on to the next place where he is uninvited. Sometimes, at parties, random people came up to him, argued, insulted him to his face. Not once did he ever turn anyone away or smack their face as we would have.

God is a young adult who spent more time with a crowd, a gang, out and about, than alone.

God is a young adult who knows us, wants to know us better, has opinions for how we should live our lives. He wants to know us better than we want to know him. Unlike lots of other young adults, he puts himself out there, gives an invitation to the big party, risks rejection. And most whom he invites reject him. Our refusal to let down our guard, get loose, and join the party must make him feel lousy, though he doesn't show it. Even though we said "No" to him in as nice a way as we know how, and even though we gave him little encouragement, we bet he will call in the morning. Then again and again and again. We might as well relent and say "Yes."

God is a young adult—inexperienced, outspoken, rash, always in motion, having difficulty settling in, staying on the subject, moving in the same direction. He is almost nothing we expected in God.

Like many his age, he has yet to develop good self-defense mechanisms. He will probably be hurt. Whatever he thinks, he says. Idealistic, innocent, wise beyond his years, always reaching out, always desiring contact, wanting to touch, to risk

relationship. He loves to stay out late, engage in risky behavior, launch out on a trip in the middle of the night, middle of a storm, up all night until dawn.

God is a young adult in motion, all potential. Maybe that's the reason he is tough to pin down, to define, to fix. He is the polite kid next door who wants to be helpful. He is the guy on the make at the bar your mother warned you about. He is the belligerent, pushy, troublemaker wanting to start an argument. Everybody enjoys hanging out with him; nobody wants to follow him.

God is a young adult: intense, passionate, unbalanced, immoderate, passionate but not as we usually use that word, oddly disinterested in sex, despite what you have heard from the Methodist General Conference. He may be a thirty-something, single male, but he doesn't act like most of them when it comes to sex, marriage, and family. We suspect that he will ingratiate himself to us, tempt us to do things our fathers warned us never to do, ask us for money. It makes us nervous to be alone with him. Without any encouragement, he will call us, maybe not tomorrow or the next day, but he will call. He will.

God is a young adult who constantly pushes the envelope, tests the bounds of propriety. He is the redneck good old boy calling out, "Hey! Watch this!" before he jumps. He is the unshaven, dark, long haired Near Eastern looking twenty something behind you in line at the airport, the one to whom you want TSA to give a particularly close look. How can a man be that threatening when he is unarmed?

Why couldn't God have matured, settled down, be middle aged, middle class, *via media*, middle of the road before God got close and personal? Why didn't God come to us building on the past, moderately? Why this lurch to the left, then to the right, careening into the future, all promise, potential, and forward movement? Ever onward, vital, youthful, energy confined in a Jew. Why so few opportunities for quiet reflection, meditation, and rest? When will he settle down, get a minivan, vote Republican, develop spiritual disciplines, and act like the God we expected?

God is a young adult whom we did not expect. This much motion, this much passion, this relentlessness of contact, intrusive, boundariless intimacy, boundless energy.

He makes friends quickly and keeps them for eternity. Like his generation, he is slow to judge. Did I mention that he has trouble staying in one place long?

God is a young adult who will ask some outrageous favor, even before he knows you that well. Violator of boundaries, he touches, caresses, fondles feet, kisses other men on the mouth, even those who betray him.

Unlike many his age, he was not in the military. But his "peace" is no peace as people my age define peace. While he never once raised his hand against anybody, something about him made us want him dead.

Hear me: I did not say we are free to picture God any way we like; I say that God is free to be God as God likes. God is not a sometimes helpful projection of all our aspirations of the God we thought we needed. God is the controversial, even offensive projection of God upon us as scruffy, unshaven, near eastern young adult in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." He wants you, comes to you, comes on to you, desires to get dangerous, cause you to be careless. In many and various ways, God has spoken to us as a young adult, getting younger.

THE FOLLOWING LETTER was written in response to Bishop Willimon's sermon preached last year at the Festival of Homiletics. Bishop Willimon forwarded the letter to the editors of *Journal for Preachers* and noted that all he knew about the letter was that it was from a Presbyterian pastor. He thought it would be good to run the letter along with the sermon. Pastors, he said, could see him "getting blistered by a hearer" and could "judge for themselves" after reading the sermon. The editors of *JP* thought it a good idea for pastors to see even so distinguished a preacher as Will Willimon "getting blistered." No doubt many of us have gotten blistered for much less provocative sermons.

To Festival of Homiletics Organizers:

Will Willimon's sermon seemed on the verge of an abuse of power. I could not look him in the eye as the sermon went on and as he seemed to revel in making his audience more and more uncomfortable. I did not clap when it was complete....By all means stretch my imagination about the image of God, push me to consider things..., but do not make me feel dirty and vulnerable....The vulnerability Will exposed with God named as a dangerous predator and only named as this young, middle eastern, sexually frustrated man did not challenge me....He did not move beyond this to promise, hope, or grace. We were taken to darkness and left in darkness with Will appearing to revel in it all. Using only negative stereotypes of young men as dangerous colored men as terrorists, and a sexually frustrated Jesus waiting to fondle, coming after us as prey, was irresponsible.

If Will's purpose was to shock, he succeeded....But he also seems to have succeeded in perhaps abusing his role as preacher. What gospel was preached here? What good news? What hope declared?...I think a terrible example was set for us....What a waste of an opportunity to preach to transform or challenge us, to feed us life giving water. There was no aspect of pastoral preaching revealed here. Someone is going to take the message just heard home and preach it to his/her congregation, without sensitivity to the sexually abused, without sensitivity to women, leaving the congregation in darkness, and fearing God. As Festival Organizers, I believe you have a responsibility to raise the standards for preaching and not lower them....That preacher reflects poorly on the rest of us....God did not seem revealed through Willimon today. Willimon seemed only to reveal himself.