

Good morning.

The title of my sermon this morning is “The Divine Face of Humans, The Human Face of God.”

Here is a summary of where we are in the Elijah/Elisha story today.

It was written by our beloved former Associate Pastor, Amanda Taylor. I thank her for this.

In the final days of Elijah’s ministry, Israel is in turmoil. King Ahab repeatedly ignores God’s prophets, choosing political deals over obedience. When he spares Israel’s enemy, God warns him that his own life will be lost in return.

Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, only makes things worse. When a man named Naboth refuses to sell his vineyard, she has him falsely accused and executed. Elijah confronts Ahab, prophesying that his dynasty will fall and that Jezebel will meet a violent end.

Ahab later dies in battle, exactly as God foretold. His son Ahaziah takes the throne but follows in his father’s footsteps—rejecting God, worshiping idols, and seeking help from foreign gods. When he falls from his palace window, instead of turning to the Lord, he inquires of Baal-Zebub. Elijah delivers God’s message: “Because you did not seek the Lord, you will not recover.” Ahaziah dies, and his brother Jehoram becomes king.

These events set the stage for Elijah’s departure. Confrontation, miracles, and warnings to wayward kings have marked his ministry. Now, his time is ending, and the question looms: Who will carry on his prophetic mission?

This is where we turn to Elisha, the one who has been following Elijah, watching, learning, and preparing. What happens next will shape the future of Israel’s prophetic voice.

In my work in and around Triune Mercy Center, I hope to paint a picture of God.

I also hope to paint a picture of us, human beings created from the dust of the earth and the breath of God and holding the Imago Dei, the Image of God, within us.

You might be thinking, “Wait a minute, Trevor. I thought you were a writer, not a painter.

And you would be right.

When I say I hope to paint a picture of God and I hope to paint a picture of us I mean this.

I want my words and my actions to be my two favorite colors, sunflower yellow and cornflower blue, and use them to paint for you a beautiful image of God and a beautiful image of the human being.

And since we are the Beloved Community here at TMC, you can also use your words and your actions as your two favorite colors to use to paint for me a beautiful image of God and a beautiful image of the human being.

Since we are the Beloved Community here at TMC, imagine how beautiful our painting will be when we put all of our work together.

It will be a masterpiece!

So please let me start today by painting an image of the human being.

What does it mean to be human?

What might it mean when I say the words, "The divine face of humans?"

I think we can find an answer to these two questions in our story from 2 Kings 2.

I think we can find an answer to these two questions by walking alongside Elijah and Elisha, looking closely at what they do and listening carefully to what they say.

(Read 2 Kings 2: 1-18)

By walking alongside Elijah and Elisha, I see these three qualities -

1. COMMITMENT
2. COMPASSION
3. COURAGE

They are qualities that we nurture and grow to help make us fully human.

But Pastor Jennifer reminded us in her sermons that prophets were also fully human because of their flaws, foibles and fallibilities, our flaws, foibles and fallibilities.

We saw this again and again in the stories she preached to us about Elijah.

I'd like to take a magnifying glass and look closely at Elijah here.

In verse 11 we read, "Suddenly a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire came between Elijah and Elisha, and Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind."

In this moment, I see the divine face of the human.

I see the beautiful image of the human being.

Here is a small story of I time when I saw the divine face of the human, when I saw the beautiful image of the human being.

The neighborhoods around the school where I taught for 16 years are filled with families from Mexico, Central America and South America.

The children of these families make their way each morning through the doors of the school, through the doors of their classrooms, and through the door of their teachers' hearts.

At various times and from various people during past election cycles, these Latino neighbors were described with demagogic, destructive and dehumanizing language.

I know from my life with them that this language does not tell the real story, does not paint the true picture, of the committed, compassionate and creative people they are to me and to our community.

Let me tell you a story.

There was a boy in my classroom.

His name was Hilcias.

He had the earth in his eyes and the sun in his smile.

Sometimes he laughed until he cried, and sometimes he cried until he washed the sadness from his heart, but at all times he kept those eyes and that heart open to learn as much as he could from the people and the places around him.

He spoke Spanish mostly, and English a littly, so at the beginning of the year we could barely communicate with each other.

He was learning more and more English words and phrases as the school weeks passed by, and I was learning more and more Spanish words and phrases, so we were getting along just fine.

His Multi Language Learner teacher came to pick him up on the last day of school before Christmas break.

"Bye Mr. Barton," he said with a smile. "I will be back SOON."

"Bye Hilcias," I said with my own smile.

"I can't wait to see you AGAIN."

We giggled and he walked out into the hallway with other English language learners.

Soon he did return again.

He walked to my table and placed a letter in front of me.

"This is for you," he said, and he walked back to his table to resume his writing project.

"I am thankful for Mr. Barton," said the letter.

“Here are some reasons why.

First you teach me how to do fiction and nonfiction stories.

Second you help me know how can I be good at writing.

Finally you make me happy when you pick me to be the student of the day.”

I lifted my eyes to Hilcias.

I thought about his Mother bringing him and his younger brother to the United States from Mexico, hoping to make una vida mejor, a better life, for them.

I thought about how thankful I was to be his teacher, to work with him every day to help him be all that he could be and do all that he could do for the world.

I thought about how wonderful he was.

I picked up my pen and wrote a letter back to him.

I walked over to his table and placed it in front of him.

“This is for you,” I said, and I walked back to my table to resume my work.

“I am thankful for Hilcias,” said my letter.

“Here are some reasons why.

First you teach me how to be a better teacher because you are a great student.

Second you told me you want to become a doctor and there is a kindness in your heart and a sharpness in your mind that will make you a great doctor.

Finally you make me happy. You make me happy you are my student. Thank you.”

Hilcias was deported with his Mom and brother later that year.

It broke my heart.

I tried everything in my power to help his family stay in South Carolina.

But, alas, the power of a public school teacher/street writer is no match for the power of the machination of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, for the power of demagogic politicians who stoke fear of the ‘other’ for their own political and financial gain.

Whenever you hear the words “immigrant,” “illegal,” or “wall,” I hope you see the hopeful, thoughtful face and hear the kind, soft voice of Hilcias, as I do.

On his last day of school, I gave him a stethoscope.

Somewhere along the US Mexico border, there is a little boy with a stethoscope around his neck who wants to change our world.

He already changed mine.

Ah, the divine face of the human, the beautiful image of the human being.

Now, let me paint a picture of God.

What does it mean to be God?

What might it mean when I say the words, "The human face of God?"

I think we can also find an answer to these two questions in our story from 2 Kings 2.

I think we can find an answer to these two questions by looking at a strange story in the last verses of 2 Kings 2.

Before I read the story, I want you to remember something Pastor Jennifer said last week.

We do not use violence.

As followers of Jesus, we are taught to confront violence with non-violence.

That is one of the great witnesses Christians have in the world.

But what do we do when we confront violence in the Old Testament?

To be honest, most of the time I don't know what to do with it.

I read this story and I'm left scratching my head.

(Read 2 Kings 2: 23-24)

Let me try to make some sense of this story.

I'll do that by taking the story and looking at it through the larger story of God's relationship with people in history.

The Hebrew words that translators translate as "boys" in this passage are "na'ar" and "qatan."

Those two Hebrew words can be translated into English as “small boys.”

But, in this story, they can also be translated into English as “young men who are servants,” servants in the temple of Ba’al.

If we translate the words this way, this story becomes a story about the God of life, YHWH, and a God of death, Ba’al.

It helps us remember that YHWH is a God who protects the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the land.

It helps us remember that YHWH is a God who has a preferential option for the poor.

It helps us remember that YHWH is a God who always has the power to bring —

Love from hate
Pardon from injury
Faith from doubt
Hope from despair
Light from darkness
Joy from sadness.

When God sees hate, injury, doubt, despair, darkness, sadness - oppression - injustice - and when God hears God’s people cry out for help, then God comes like a mother bear to protect her children and make things right.

By watching God, I see these three qualities.

1. COMMITMENT
2. COMPASSION
3. COURAGE

In these three qualities that help make us fully human, I see the human face of God.

I see the beautiful image of God.

Here is a small story of a time when I saw the human face of God, when I saw the beautiful image of God.

During my junior year in college, I spent spring break week in Washington, D.C.

One night I went out with a group of people to provide soup, sandwiches and hot chocolate to unhoused folks around the capital.

We rode around in an old bakery truck, stopped in designated spots and set up two stations, one for the food and one for the drink.

At one of the stops, I worked the hot drink station.

There was a long line of people in front of me.

The night was bitterly, unbearably cold.

The wind off the Potomac River cut through my coveralls and chilled me to my bone.

My eyes glazed over from the crowd and the cold, and though I said, "God bless you," and, "Go in peace," with every cup of hot chocolate I gave to every person who held out hands to me, I stopped seeing the tired, sad eyes and grizzled faces of the people and started thinking of the gentle warmth of the heater in the truck and in my room back home.

I felt a tug on my arm.

I looked down and the face of a little girl came into focus.

She was so slight and thin I would have missed her, would not have seen her, were it not for the tug.

She put her little hand into my hand.

"Excuse me," she whispered, so softly I could barely hear her, would not have heard her were it not for careful listening, "Could you give me some hot chocolate for my mom?"

Her mom was sick at home.

This small one did a big thing and came out into the cold and braved the crowds to find something for her mom to eat and drink.

I made a little package of food and drink, put it in her hands, and sent her on her way.

"You're a kind, wonderful person," I whispered to her, "And your mom is lucky to have you."

She walked away into the mass of people and disappeared into them.

I would never have seen her, would never have heard her, would never have been moved by her kindness, had she not tugged me.

And through her face I saw the face of God with my eyes and felt the tug of God on my heart.

Ah, the human face of God, the beautiful face of God.

Walk out the doors of Triune today filled with commitment, compassion and courage.

See in yourself the divine face of the human being.

Walk out the doors of Triune today filled with commitment, compassion and courage.

Look for the human face of God.

You will find it in the smallest and most forgotten places among the smallest and most forgotten people around you.

Look at the neighbors beside you.

You will find it there.

May it be so.

Amen.