

## *“The Magnificent God”*

*Isaiah 55:6-15; Ephesians 3:14-21*

January 17, 2021

One year when I as a kid, my mother told me I could order anything under \$20 that I wanted from the Swiss Colony catalogue. Now for those of you who don't know, Swiss Colony sells cheeses, candies and an assortment of food products. You don't much think about them until Christmas and then, as soon as November rolls around, you're bombarded with their catalogues.

It being the 1980's, \$20 was a princely sum to spend. So, I poured over the pages of that catalogue for days and days. I wanted to make the right choice. Would it be the Baby Swiss? Would it be a collection of cheese spreads? In the end, I ordered something called a chocolate Chris-mouse. It was Chocolate mouse, decorated with white, green and red fondant icing. *I couldn't wait for it to arrive.*

In my mind, it just kept growing and growing and growing in size with each passing day. I honestly believed that Chocolate Chris-mouse was going to be the size of large dog. And then, the day came. The postman delivered the package to the door. My mom handed me the box. It looked smaller than I'd anticipated but, I figured, looks can be deceiving. Even as I was unwrapping it I just knew it would be as huge as my mind imagined it to be.

As I peeled away the packaging, I sadly realized it wasn't as large as I'd hoped. In fact, it was much, much smaller. If I'd really looked at the description in the catalogue, I would've seen the chris-mouse was no bigger than 7 inches by 5 inches. Even though it was tasty, it somehow never quite tasted as good as I'd hoped. It couldn't...it was just too small.

And that's just it, isn't it? Early in our years, we imagine things to be grand, splendid, larger than life. Then comes the day. The day when we really see things with eyes unclouded by our imaginations. We're disappointed. Falling from the clouds of our larger-than-life expectations, we plummet to planet earth and it hurts when we land.

Feeling the pain of shattered expectations, we grow suspicious and leery. So we guard our hopes and our expectations. Our minds won't allow our dreams to soar very high for we know when the bottom drops out, the impact will be less painful the lower we set them.

And it's so easy to take these smaller-than-life expectations into our faith lives. Rev. Guy Sales notes – “In 1952, British Scripture scholar and translator J.B. Phillips wrote a book with the provocative title *Your God is Too Small*. He said: "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs."

He was right.

"The challenge for many people today is finding a God who is big enough to embrace the world and close enough to fill their inner emptiness."

And so, I wonder – How many of us have a conception of God than is two sizes too small?

Many of us, truth be told.

Without even recognizing it, we've substituted a “puny and punitive god” for the Almighty Creator of Heaven and earth. This god of our limited imagining doesn't do much out of the ordinary. This is a god stingy with mercy, extending it only to a certain kind of people, the good ones, the pretty ones, the successful ones. We too often imagine a god that's

quick to anger, slow to forgive. In a way, this god is just like us except maybe he's a skosh bit bigger. Just slightly more powerful. This god of our own making is predictable, safe, and boring.

Some of us imagine a god who lets the world run as it chooses, rarely, if ever, intervening in the realm of creation. That's our innate American deism at work. We believe this god stands back, hidden in some far and distant enclave who only peeks in from time-to-time as he wishes or when things get interesting.

If Rev. Philips were writing today, he might title his book *Your God is Too Small--and Too Distant*. He might say:

Do you remember Bette Middler's hit song "From a Distance"? I'll bet many of us recall the chorus (and don't worry, y'all, I'm not going to sing) – "God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance." The lyrics express what so many of us wrongly believe – god is far away, hoping that we'll be good to one another, but we can't expect him to intervene. Thi god hopes we'll learn how to fend for ourselves for we simply can't imagine that he'll actually nourish us with the bread of life. Rev. Sales writes "this god isn't amazing, he's more like a report from the agriculture department about anticipated wheat production."

I remember years ago at Mount Holly the kids did a Christmas play. They were wonderful but I'd made the mistake of not actually reading the script ahead of time. When the night of the performance came, I was shocked. You see the play made it seem like heaven was some sort of mixed-up human bureaucracy and that God Himself made the occasional mistake.

It was cute, like I said, but oh so problematic in its theology. Worst thing was, it made sense to a whole lot of people. After all, it's easy to force God into categories that we understand. Into being something that makes "sense" to us when the truth is far different.

In fact, this god many of us imagine is hardly worth getting out of bed early for on a Sunday morning. If we do deign drag ourselves from bed to worship this god, things best be entertaining. No silence for heaven's sake and the less liturgy the better. A loud band or a story-laden sermon is exactly what it'll take to keep our yawns muffled and our eyes from slamming shut halfway into the service.

Since we don't really expect this god to do anything amazing or honestly expect him break into our hearts and create new life, what we want is little more than life-pointers from our diminutive god. We want the pastor to tell us how to be more productive or earn more money or avoid bickering with our in-laws. If god can't astound us with his immensity or his power or his love, then at least he can function as some kind of enlightened guidance counselor.

And this small, puny god of our limited imaginations would be fine, if life didn't hurl curveballs at us from time-to-time. The problems arise when we realize that "a small and distant god leaves us feeling overwhelmed by change and threatened by emptiness." Without the solid assurance of a Great and Mighty God, too often it feels like we're existentially adrift on the seas without hope of assistance. When our footing falters, we know of no sure foundation. When change comes into our lives, we see no mighty fortress rising ahead of us.

Make no mistake about it – we're living in a generation of massive shifts; change is happening all around us. And these aren't just the harmless fluctuations of the fashion world, these are tectonic shifts in the culture. The domestic situation right now leaves us feeling jittery

about our future. Technology has brought us to the point where actually getting away from the office makes no real difference. If anything, quarantine life has made our homes our offices. We remained tethered to our jobs 24/7. There's just no room in the spreadsheet for Sabbath rest.

Ethics and morality which for thousands of years have been anchored to God's goodness and mercy have been carelessly uprooted in the name of novelty and quote-unquote "progress". We create our own understanding of good and evil based on our personal predilections without regard to anything save the most recent consumer surveys.

Everyone is temporary. Everything is impermanent. Our vulnerability to change sometimes overwhelms us; and when it does, a small god can't help us. A distant god can't do anything about the emptiness which threatens us.

We all live through times which ask more of us than we can possibly deliver. Work grinds on, but our energy is sapped dry. Needs pile up, but it seems few resources remain. Our calendars are jammed packed yet our hearts are shockingly empty. Sadness interjects itself and we utterly lack the hope to temper it with.

If you peel away all the anxiety and angst in our lives, real, imagined or otherwise, and got down to the real nitty gritty which plagues our souls this is it. By imagining God to be so small, so puny, so indifferent, so distant – we're unfilled. Deeply unsatisfied. All the other junk we accumulate – the lies, the resentments, the fears, the wounds and the worries all flow from this void within us.

So, we go about ordering the junk of this world hoping to fill that empty space within us, now for the amazing low price of \$9.99. Yet when those trinkets arrive at our doorsteps, they always disappoint us, just like that Chocolate-Chris-Mouse did for me so many years ago.

That's why we all need to hear this prayer of St. Paul in the letter to the Ephesians. In our New Testament reading this morning, we hear the awe-inspiring prayer which Paul uses to conclude the first section of his letter. Throughout this section in the letter, Paul has turned our attention over and over again to the Goodness of God. Paul has talked about sin and grace. About law and gospel. About a Creator God who has put everything in this universe and in heaven under the dominion of Jesus Christ, God with us. This isn't the puny, distant god we've created in our minds. This is the almighty God who scripture declares is with us always!

Ours is no timid God. This God lacks no power or might. This is a God who has ordered his good creation and is now restoring it through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Ours is a God who took on flesh to be with us, to know us more intimately and to redeem us from the power of sin and death. This God lacks no power or might. This is a God who stuns us with manifold beauty, unequalled authority and a vast, albeit sometimes frightening love. When He reveals Himself to us, we recognize He holds us in his loving hands every single second. Apart from this ongoing provision, we simply would not exist.

And so Paul offers up this prayer to his brothers and sisters in Christ in Ephesus. He prays three things for them. First, he prays that the Holy Spirit would indwell in them all, providing them great strength. Then, Paul hopes that in that indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that they would come to know the breadth and length and height and depth of God. Finally, Paul prays that his fellow church men and women would know the love of Christ towards them so that they would be filled with all the fullness of God.

What Paul prays for the church at Ephesus, I pray for you and for myself. I pray that in the power of the Holy Spirit, God would come into our hearts and minds and give us strength. The strength to feel our puffed-up egos explode into a thousand tiny pieces by the revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the firstborn of all creation who now stands as Sovereign Lord over all eternity. I pray that God gives us the strength to know that we're NOT alone here on Earth. But more importantly, to know that we're NOT the center of the universe. One far better equipped for that duty already stands in service.

Strengthened by the Holy Spirit, I pray we all get a life-changing glimmering of the wonderful enormity of God. According to St. Anselm, an 11<sup>th</sup> century monk. God is that which no greater can be conceived. What that means is that no matter how far our mind stretches to see Him, God will always be even bigger still. His vastness and power pulls the breath from our lungs, filling us with awe and wonder. Like looking out at the ocean and being taken by the immensity of it all until we, like the seraphim, cry out, "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

But this is no ocean. This is a God who is, and always will be, love. Love that crafted every atom, every electron, every quark and every God-particle. This is a God whose love wove together every planet, every star, every sun, every galaxy.

And, most importantly, this is a God who, in the fullness of time, took on flesh in Christ Jesus. In his immeasurable love, God walked, talked, ate, slept, grieved and even died for us and for our salvation. In his love, He's been raised into heaven and he waits there for us now in body yet in His Spirit he joins us in every single breath we take.

This is the kind of love which fills us with the fullness of God. This is the kind of love which shows our fears, our worries and our present sadness to be but fleeting moments in time, nothing more than vapors up against the eternal God who has prepared space for us in his everlasting kingdom. This is the kind of love that draws tears to your eyes and studs your flesh with goose pimples.

Friends, hear the Good News revealed in Scripture – We worship no small, distant deity.

We worship God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Immeasurable, powerful, caring, kind, merciful, loving.

Rejoice people of God! If *this* God is for us, then, believe me NOTHING can stand against us! Not Covid-19, not domestic unrest, not even death itself.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.