### “I Will Comfort You—Hear My Voice” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, May 12, 2019

**Genesis 1:27**

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

**Isaiah 66:12–13**

12 Thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to Jerusalem like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. 13 As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

**John 10:22–28**

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”25Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; 26but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”

I want to welcome all the families who are here today, and mention the growth that takes place under the care and nurturing of mothers and fathers. May we grow in our understanding of God, who is our spiritual parent.

Our Bible passages are going to talk about the image or images of God, but in different ways.

We start with the Genesis passage that says we were created in the image of God, and also that we were created male and female. The fact of being created “in the image of God” is no different for men and for women. We both bear the mark or image of our Creator.

But what does it mean? Some people think it refers to our having *reason* and thought. I have heard what I think is a better idea, since it takes in more of the spiritual dimension. This says that “made in the image of God” means we were given personality and choice, and that God recognizes our uniqueness. Another good idea is that it means we have spirituality, the ability to perceive spiritual values like truth and goodness. So this interpretation puts the emphasis on the spiritual capacities we have been given, including the impulse to strive for spiritual values. It’s an impulse deep within, that comes from our indwelling spirit. This God-given spirit-gift would *recognize* truth and goodness. It gives us the “*A-ha*” of spiritual recognition. So maybe our individual spirit is what is meant by being created in the *image* of God.

There is line in the Book of Job that speaks of this spirit. It is where the character Elihu says “it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding” (Job 32:8 NIV). What is special about a human being, according to Elihu, is both the God-given spirit *and* the God-given understanding. Proverbs says it this way: “The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord, searching every inmost part.” (20:27)—as though God left a GPS tracking device within us, a God-positioning system.

All of these options talk about our carrying something from our Creator within us. Now I’m going to speak of *image* in a different way, not God’s image in us but “image” in the sense of a metaphor for God, an image *for* God or about God. In the last chapter of Isaiah, the author pictures God being like a mother who “comforts her child” (66:13). God is kind, close, and comforting like a mother.

The prophet Hosea gives even more detail to this image. Hosea shows God bending down to feed the child Israel, taking him by the arms, and teaching him to walk (Hos 11:3–4). God goes out of God’s way to gently lead and teach little child Israel. A psalmist is going to use the same image, but as seen from the child’s viewpoint. He says he is “like a weaned child with its mother” (Ps 131:2). All three of these passages have an emotional power to them. Hosea and Isaiah are trying to get people to see that God *cares* for them and *tends* them, as a mother would, and the psalmist seems to picture himself as a five-year-old, lying in his mother’s lap.

A mother’s love can be a good image for God. So can a father’s love, the main image that Jesus himself used. As children, we benefitted from both our mother’s and our father’s love. And, really, the love of both our mothers and our fathers—maybe even of our aunts and uncles—are like foretastes of the love of God. Human love gives us a glimpse of divine love. Although our human love can have defects or be inconsistent, the positive and nurturing side of human love is a *valid* foretelling of the divine love, though God’s love is always consistent and far-sighted. Our human loves can draw from that divine love. Then it *really* becomes true thathomeis where the heart is, and where love dwells.

Combining these Old Testament passages, we get the message that God is within us, around us, and close to us emotionally.

The gospel passage is going to say something about closeness, but it uses a different metaphor, not the parental one, but that of shepherd and sheep. Jesus says those who know him “hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Your dog or cat knows your voice, and if it is a dog, it follows you. Maybe an exceptional cat will do that, too. The shepherd image highlights the idea of *protection*. “No one will snatch them out of my hand,” he says (10:28). Sheep are vulnerable, and they really need protecting. That’s one reason that the sheep is a good metaphor for disciples. We are vulnerable, too. We can be swayed, sometimes, by seductive rumors, simplistic answers, fears, and biases. We are surprisingly vulnerable.

Even Peter, whose nickname means “the Rock,” was susceptible to fear, at least on the night Jesus was killed. And Judas was susceptible to political ambition, and then to resentment when it became obvious that his ambition would not be fulfilled. In fact, we are told that the apostles frequently argued about who would be first in the coming kingdom, but they loved Jesus and they came around, accepting instruction from Jesus. They didn’t give in to resentment, as Judas did.

But can it be doubted that they—and *we—*can sometimes be misled by ambitions, obsessions, or fears? We need a shepherd, because we easily go astray. We need a mother or a father. Sometimes we need a therapist. We certainly need to learn not to give in to resentment, not to *nurse* it and cherish it. Now, if you have been mistreated, it is natural to resent that, and your feelings are not sinful. But don’t *harbor* resentment, the way Judas, and also Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, did.

To summarize: our Old Testament passages spoke of God within, God close by, and God as a mother. The gospel says that Jesus teaches us until we become so used to him that we “know his voice”: we recognize him. That means we recognize his decency and his character, and whenever we hear falsehood and deception, we know that *that* is not *his* voice. If we are increasingly led by our Godly gifts, we become more attuned to genuine truth, beauty, and goodness. And then, whenever someone tries to convince us that they are something they are not, we can detect a lie; we can smell a rat.

We are created “in the image of God.” God cares for us like a mother, tenderly leading us. And we are reminded that we can come to know Jesus’ voice, like a sheep knows its shepherd’s, and that no one can snatch us out of his hand. These are things to be cherished.

So I ask, isn’t it actually a bit crazy to get stuck in resentment if you know that God has placed a God-tracking device within you? Further, isn’t it silly to listen to static, when you know the station that Jesus is on? So what is your assignment this week? It is to go forth and trust. Remember how close God is, and that he has placed his homing signal in your heart.