

In the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. And the Earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

And Satan said, "It doesn't get any better than this."

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit," and God saw that it was good.

And Satan said, "There goes the neighborhood."

And God said, "Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle, and over all the Earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the Earth." And so God created humanity in his own image; male and female created he them. And God looked upon Man and Woman and saw that they were lean and fit.

And Satan said, "I know how I can get back in this game."

And God populated the earth with broccoli and cauliflower and spinach, green and yellow vegetables of all kinds, so Man and Woman would live long and healthy lives.

And Satan created McDonald's. And McDonald's brought forth the

99-cent double cheeseburger. And Satan said to Man, "You want fries with that?"

And Man said, "Supersize them." And Man gained 5 pounds.

And God created the healthful yogurt, that woman might keep her figure that man found so fair.

And Satan brought forth chocolate. And Woman gained 5 pounds.

And God said, "Try my crispy fresh salad."

And Satan brought forth Ben and Jerry's. And Woman gained 10 pounds.

And God said, "I have sent thee heart-healthy vegetables and olive oil with which to cook them."

And Satan brought forth chicken-fried steak so big it needed its own platter.

And Man gained 10 pounds and his bad cholesterol went through the roof.

And God brought forth running shoes and Man resolved to lose those extra pounds.

And Satan brought forth cable TV with remote control so Man would not have to toil to change channels.

And Man gained another 20 pounds.

And God said, "You're running up the score, Devil." And God brought forth the potato, a vegetable naturally low in fat and brimming with nutrition.

And Satan peeled off the healthful skin and sliced the starchy

center into chips and deep-fat fried them. And he created sour cream dip also.

And Man clutched his remote control and ate the potato chips swaddled in cholesterol. And Satan saw and said, "It is good."

And Man went into cardiac arrest.

And God sighed and created quadruple bypass surgery.

And Satan created HMO's

This is truly a silly way to introduce a sermon about the nature of God and our relationship with him, but this does fit the picture. There are lots of jokes about God, but we are often left to ask, "What is God like?" I can't directly see God. I can't touch him. I can't absolutely definitely hear him. If we're following the five senses it's pretty odd to think about smelling God or tasting God.

This is all important stuff. Actually it is of ultimate importance. If we have to trust in God for salvation, or eternal life, or whatever may or may not exist after death we want to get it right. You only get one chance at life. There's no reset button and no way to start the game again. "Game over" is ultimate.

The gospel of John was written largely for the purpose of showing us what God is like. Jesus came as God's ultimate revelation of his nature. Jesus is quoted several times in John's gospel as saying, "The Father and I are one."

If we look at our gospel reading for today we see that Jesus is in conflict with the religious leaders. Jesus is in the temple during the holiday of the Dedication of the temple. That holiday is named Hanukah today. This is not the first conflict Jesus has had and so they say to him, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense?" (This could also be translated as, "How long are you going to keep annoying us?") If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." And Jesus replies, "I have told you, and you do not believe."

What has Jesus told them? That yes indeed he is the Messiah, but far far more than just the Messiah. Remember, messiah means to be the Lord's anointed. And so King Saul, King David, and many others were also called messiah. Even foreign pagan kings like King Cyrus of Persia is called, "The Lord's messiah." Being the messiah is no big deal. Jesus is saying that he is more than just another messiah. He is God's ultimate revelation. He is God!

Of course the temple leaders take offense at this! How could someone dare to be so bold as to claim to be God!?! And yet, of course, Jesus is. That's the whole point of the story! Jesus was God on earth come to reveal to humans as fully and truly as possible what God's nature is. That way we can know. That way we can be confident about the answers to these ultimate questions that face every single one of us.

And lest we forget, what does Jesus reveal is God's ultimate nature? It is love of course. Jesus sums up all the laws and commandments with one phrase, "I give you a new commandment. You are to love one another just as I have loved you."

This would be a great and ultimate answer for all people and all places and all times if we hadn't lost sight of what love really is. Too often we think of love as a powerful but passing feeling. Or perhaps love comes off being nothing but sweet and nice. Martin Luther and the other reformers in the Protestant Reformation knew they had to restore the idea of God being loving, but they also knew that people would quickly come to exploit that idea too. If God is nothing but nice and sweet, why should I be good? God won't hurt me. If God is so great, then why is there pain? Why is there evil?

These are all philosophical questions to which there are no definitive answers, but of course Jesus does give us both model of what God is like and what relationship with God is like. You know this well, Jesus teaches us to consider God like a father. That is the clearest and most consistent model of God's nature in the Bible.

Now like all images it has its weaknesses. If you had a good and loving father the image works great. If you had an abusive, manipulative or absent father then the image doesn't work at all. Not all fathers are good. But if you didn't have a father or a good one, consider someone that you do think is a good one.

Good fathers want what's best for their children. They work hard and sacrifice a lot. They know that raising up good and effective children involves being both kindness and accountability. Sometimes you have to be stern. Sometimes you have to be sweet.

And sometimes it changes from time to time and age to age. Last Sunday after worship my son Ben was clowning around he fell and tore his pants and skinned his knee. He came to me for help. There was nothing too bad, rug burn and nothing else. Yet while I didn't want to be mean to him I also wanted him to know that clowning around like that wasn't acceptable. He got

support from me but he also knew it was wrong. He asked for a band aid and I gave him one, but it was up to him to be a big boy and put it on. I wouldn't have treated the whole situation differently if he was two years old however.

If you don't know how to pray to God, then set yourself up in a quiet place and imagine what it would be like to have a conversation with your father - or a good father. You'd be able to safely share fears and struggles. You'd get support and advice. You'd get the help you need even if your dad didn't solve your problems for you. You'd share a laugh at a good joke. A father-child relationship is a strong one, a very strong one. It is not easily broken and can withstand a lot of ups and downs.

Such is the nature of our God. Such is the nature of our relationship with God. God is our Father - our heavenly Father, our ultimate Father. Our father in whom we have confidence; who will protect and keep us through all things. Amen