IMAGES OF GOD: VISUALIZING GOD THROUGH BIBLICAL METAPHOR AT THE BYROMVILLE–DRAYTON CHARGE

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the James & Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Atlanta, GA
2018
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To Mom and Dad, who first taught me how to see God, and to Elizabeth, Claire, and Caroline, who reveal God more clearly every day.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all those who have made me who I am and who have stood beside me in this long journey, I give thanks. To my wife and best friend, Elizabeth, thank you for your unending love, support, and selfless sacrifice. I am appreciative beyond words for my girls, Claire and Caroline, who have given their love, faith, and patience. Mom and Dad, thank you for always believing in me and raising me in this great faith. For all my family, thank you for the encouragement, childcare, and grace you have provided. Thank you to the faculty and staff at the McAfee School of Theology, especially Dr. Karen G. Massey, for leading me through this challenging and rewarding experience of academic and spiritual growth. Your guidance and feedback were invaluable. To my Spiritual Director, the Rev. Teresa Edwards, thank you for always seeing God’s presence and work in my life and for being willing to share what you see. For all of the people of the Byromville United Methodist Church, the Drayton United Methodist Church, the Wesley Foundation of Georgia Southwestern State University, and the First United Methodist Church of Warner Robins, thank you for the gifts of cooperation, space, and time as I completed this journey. Finally, and above all, all glory be to the LORD God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who appears to us in so many ways, if only we would look.
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Parishioners in most local churches experience prayer as a process of asking and receiving from God, followed by an expression of thanksgiving for answered prayer. Other dimensions of prayer, such as prayer for the sake of communion with God, are not emphasized as much in many local churches. Imaginative prayer is one manifestation of prayer for the sake of communion with God. Imaginative prayer involves mentally visualizing interactions with God. In order to do this, people of faith must be able to visualize God. Biblical metaphor provides the framework in which persons of faith can imagine God.

Building on the work of such religious thinkers as Sallie McFague, this study seeks to identify the primary images of God of parishioners of a rural, two-point charge in the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. This study further seeks to expose parishioners to a diverse array of biblical images for God through the use of Scripture, metaphor, and photographic imagery. Participants are also invited into guided imaginative exercises based upon biblical metaphor. These exercises serve as an introduction to the practice of imaginative prayer.
This study reveals that, while many participants continue to visualize God in ways that reflect nature and male anthropomorphic images of God, participants also connect with images of God that reflect nurture and female anthropomorphic images of God. A new dual image for God – God as Mother and Father – is offered as a viable option for the religious imagination. This image also reflects the relationship between the image of God and the male-female human identity attested to in the biblical creation accounts. This study can be used in conjunction with spiritual growth curriculum within the local church, as image reproductions and guided imaginative exercise scripts are included.
CHAPTER ONE
THE SANCTIFIED IMAGINATION

Imagine for a moment that you are standing in a wide field. The field seems pleasant to you and it is subdivided into four smaller fields, with each quadrant labeled. One is the field of *Finances*, another is the field of *Relationships*. The third field is known as *Morality*, while the fourth is labeled *Societal Expectations*. You are walking comfortably in the field for a moment, but you begin to panic as the ground below gives way at your feet. You look down to realize that you are in the midst of rapidly deteriorating quicksand. As you begin sinking in the field of finances, you struggle over to the field of relationships. However, the ground is no more stable here. You desperately hop from one field to the next, only to realize that the ground in each is failing. At the point in which your struggle has almost consumed you, you notice a large rock in the middle of the wide field.

Upon noticing the steady rock you find yourself at its base, transported almost as if someone had lifted you in their arms and carried you there. Here you are safe, you are stable, and you are at peace. As you are gathered back to your senses by becoming aware of your connection to the solid foundation of the rock, you look back out at the field. What had once seemed pleasant and comfortable to you is a wasteland of danger. You know that you must still navigate in the field, and so you begin to cry out for help and hope. As you do, the rock shakes. Even though the base splits a little, you remain firmly
on its top. From the place where it split the rock pours out a stone pathway in the middle of the field of finances. Stone by stone marks a way through the quicksand desert. From another opening at the base comes a similar path in the other three directions. You can now find firm footing on the stone pathways weaving their way through the fields of relationship, morality, and societal expectations.

You step forward from the solid rock and find the same security and peace on these new paths that you found on the rock itself. The path allows you to venture out and yet stay connected to the source of the stone walkways. As you walk the different paths during the day, you notice that they take you to new places of hope. At the end of each day, you are invited back to the large rock to find rest and renewal. You begin to realize that the rock is God, and it is God alone who secures your peace and your path. As you rest on the rock, you speak words of thanksgiving and praise to God. How does the rock respond – with new and exciting paths, by shaking in a display of power, or even in speaking words to you from the openings at its base?

Such is one experience of imaginative prayer. By employing the imagination in the life of prayer, a disciple of Jesus Christ can discover the depths of God’s character and thus experience deeper communion with God. I have been praying in such ways for many years. I have early memories of sensing a spiritual presence with me while alone in my bedroom at night as a little boy. This was not a threatening or alarming presence, but a comforting, loving presence. Early on I began to picture Jesus within my mind, connecting him with this invisible presence. This image of Jesus that I imagined was based largely on print reproductions of paintings of Jesus that I saw in churches and
family homes. This Jesus was the olive skinned, brown haired, bearded Jesus familiar to many Americans from paintings that pictured Jesus’s profile from the shoulders up or Jesus standing at a door and knocking. This image of Jesus became a permanent fixture in my mind as I prayed, still sensing the loving presence beside me. As I grew in both age and spiritual awareness, I began to picture interactions with Jesus; the image of Jesus was no longer static, but active.

In the fall of my sophomore year of college, I was introduced to the concept of the sanctified imagination while reading Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. As Foster notes, “Imagination often opens the door to faith.” Furthermore, St. Ignatius of Loyola describes visions from God that were not externally perceived, but internally felt, seen, and known, most likely through the imagination. Personally, imaginative prayer has allowed for deeper emotional and spiritual connection to God, resulting in a more profound communion experience with God. In recent years, this communion has been experienced through a personal imaginative prayer setting in which I regularly encounter the living Christ. I imagine myself as a young boy encountering Jesus along the banks of a quiet creek. The sky is a pale blue filled with long, wispy clouds. It is a cool day and Jesus is sitting on a large rock beside the water. I climb into his lap and lay my head upon his chest. He holds me and gently rocks me and there we converse.

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2 Ibid., 41.
Much of my experience with imaginative prayer, though, has been shaped both by educational experiences in my training as a clergyperson, through class demonstrations, readings and extensive study of spiritual disciplines, and by access to directed, focused spiritual growth mentoring. These experiences are not easily accessed, promoted, or available to persons of faith outside of the context of a seminary education. Still, my experiences with imaginative prayer were born out of a natural inclination toward the use of my imagination before they were formally shaped by those educational experiences and intentional spiritual growth mentoring relationships. The natural inclination is likely within many, if not all, of us who follow Jesus Christ. What is needed is a process by which these latent spiritual realities can be given expression.

Background

My desire is to lead the parishioners at the Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge in the regular practice of imaginative prayer. Rarely have I experienced such practices in the context of parish life. Yet, in those moments in which I have introduced imaginative prayer practices, through times of reflection in sermons and through guided experiences within the context of our charge’s weekly prayer meeting, the practices have been well received by parishioners. One parishioner described an experience of imaginative prayer, which had been incorporated as a reflection within a Sunday morning sermon, as “powerful.” Such practices, however, have not become normative within the prayer life of the parishioners outside of these introductory experiences.

The Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge is located in rural southern Georgia and consists of two churches – Byromville United Methodist Church (BUMC)
and Drayton United Methodist Church (DUMC). The charge had a combined membership of approximately 120 persons with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 52 persons in my tenure between June 2014 and January 2018. BUMC is located in a town with a population of approximately 500 persons. DUMC is located in an unincorporated area along the Flint River in greater Dooly County.

Parishioners are invited into three weekly communal prayer activities: the pastoral prayer in Sunday morning worship, a Tuesday morning prayer meeting, and a weekly prayer prompt included as part of a weekly discipleship guide. Prayer in the Byromville/Drayton Charge is primarily expressed through the practices of asking/receiving/thanksgiving. While these are important aspects of prayer, prayer is more fully experienced when it is also understood as the experience of communing with God.

To experience prayer as communion with God, the prayer participant must be able to connect to God as person as opposed to idea. This allows the prayer participant to emotionally and interpersonally connect to God. Imaginative prayer enables prayer participants to connect to God as person. To visualize personal encounters with a personal God, however, prayer participants must visually imagine the invisible God. In ministry I have encountered many persons of faith for whom imagining God is difficult, for their personal experience does not support or connect with the traditional image of God as father. For instance, one ordination candidate with whom I worked struggled with this identification of God due to an abusive relationship with her earthly father. There are persons of faith who have just as much difficulty accessing aspects of God’s
character such as love or mercy because of past negative experiences. Accessing these aspects of God’s character are necessary experiences for the practice of imaginative prayer to be productive, formative, and positive. One man’s experience stands out particularly to me – after a harsh, shame-filled experience with a religious authority figure when he was a teenager, this man found it difficult to see God as anything other than harsh and shaming. Accessing the image of God as primarily loving was extremely difficult for him, even forty years later.

Biblical metaphors assist in visually imagining God. Even though biblical metaphors for God do not exclusively deal with the anthropomorphic qualities of God, such metaphors do reveal the personal character of God. Forming a mental/visual manifestation of biblical metaphors for God is necessary to the practice of imaginative prayer, which then enables prayer participants to experience prayer as communion with God. Communion with God is defined as a personal or corporate relational connection to God in which God and humanity mutually share in the goodness and intimacy of love and grace. This reality could be further understood as an act of being with God for the sake of being with God.

Purpose

In experiencing prayer as communion with God, the prayer participant must be able to connect to God as person as opposed to idea. This requires the prayer participant to interpersonally relate to God, who is revealed through Scripture to possess a particular character. Imaginative prayer enables prayer participants to connect to God as person and experience personal encounters with God, yet it is not regularly practiced within the
life of the local church. Furthermore, to visualize personal encounters with a personal God, prayer participants must visually imagine the invisible God. Biblical metaphor assists in visually imagining God while giving concrete expression to the character of the personal God. Thus, forming visual mental representations of biblical metaphors for God is necessary to the practice of imaginative prayer.

This study seeks to answer the following primary research question: How will the practice of mentally visualizing God influence and encourage the practice of imaginative prayer for the parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge? Within the framework of this primary research question, this study seeks to answer the following secondary research questions:

- What are the prevailing visual representations of God to which the parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton Charge are personally connected?
- How does exploring different biblical metaphors for God affect the way in which the parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton Charge visually imagine God?
- How will exploring new ways to visually imagine God encourage the parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton charge to practice imaginative prayer?
- How will parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton Charge describe their experience with imaginative prayer after exploring differing visual representations of biblical metaphors for God?

The purpose of this study is to encourage and empower the parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge to intentionally connect to and internalize visual, metaphorical images of God. This will enable parishioners to experience the
personal character of God while simultaneously communing with God through visual means. By exploring ways to imagine God and interactions with God, parishioners will understand more clearly how they reflect the image of God through their own being and actions. Though it is beyond the ultimate scope of this project, this study will establish a foundation for parishioners upon which they can experience deeper communion with God through the practice of imaginative prayer. This project will empower parishioners to be strengthened in their understanding of and connection to the personal, relational nature of God, while broadening their accessibility to diverse spiritual practices.

In view of this purpose, the goals of this project are:

- To explore how parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge visualize God, through determining the prevailing visual representations of God to which the parishioners are personally connected and exploring different biblical metaphors for God to which they might also connect.

- To encourage the parishioners of the Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge to practice mentally visualizing interactions with God.

This study will enable church leaders to confidently implement imaginative prayer practices in the regular rhythm of weekly communal prayer activities and will assist parishioners in deepening their experience of personal communion with God. Also, this study will strengthen the communal experience of prayer by giving the charge a shared practice and language to experience and express communion with God. Parishioners will be encouraged and enabled to view, approach, and experience God as a
personal being with whom one can share relationship. In terms of the wider Church, the results of this project will inform the researcher in the further work of preparing candidates for theological reflection necessary for the ordination process in the South Georgia Annual Conference.

For the purposes of this study, it is imperative to define the following terms: metaphorical images of God, imaginative prayer, and communion with God. Sallie McFague writes that “metaphor is the way by which we understand as well as enlarge our world and change it – that is… dealing with the unfamiliar and new… in terms of the familiar and the old, thinking of ‘this’ as ‘that’ although we know the new thing is both like and unlike the old.”

Thus, metaphorical images of God are those ways in which we understand the mystery of the supernatural God and the ways, will, and character of that supernatural God through that which we can observe in the natural world. Metaphorical imaginings and language for God is distinct from revelatory imaginings and language for God. Scriptural revelation tells us that God is ontologically YHWH – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we speak of God as rock, we understand that God is not revealed to be ontologically a rock. God shares similarities with a rock and yet in some ways God is quite dissimilar to a rock. By utilizing the similarities, we can come to understand more clearly who the One revealed to us as YHWH is. Thus, we can connect to and commune more deeply with God.

Such metaphorical thinking and imaging of God allows persons to utilize the imagination in connecting to and communing with God. Imaginative prayer is

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communication with God that is visually experienced within the mind of the person praying in which God, participant, and the substance of the prayer are pictured mentally. This practice, as imagined and practiced in this study, bridges the gap between image focused contemplative prayer and verbal focused guided meditation, creating a “delightful form of celebration”\textsuperscript{5} in the presence of God.

Finally, communion with God, the deepening of which is the ultimate purpose of this study, is defined as a personal or corporate relational connection to God in which God and humanity mutually share in the goodness and intimacy of love and grace which originates in the divine unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This reality could be further understood as an act of being with God for the sake of being with God, as opposed to an act of approaching God for the sole purpose of asking God to do something to meet an emerging need. Though such intercessory prayer is a necessary and welcomed practice in the divine/human relationship, prayer as communion with God (as understood in this study) is the more foundational aspect of the divine/human relationship. It is from being with God that true perspective of what is needed from God develops. As such, engaging the individual and corporate imagination with metaphorical images of God within the practice of imaginative prayer, for the sake of relating to God, will provide the environment for a deeper experience of communion with God. Engaging the religious imagination may even open faith communities to new possibilities within the ministries of the local church and on the denominational level, leading to creative solutions to persistent challenges or problems.

\textsuperscript{5} Foster, \textit{Celebration of Discipline}, 199.
CHAPTER 2

IMAGINATION, IMAGE, AND METAPHOR

The person of faith communes with God by employing the imagination in prayer, making prayer an experiential exercise and not simply a rote or singularly focused (mental, affective, spiritual) exercise. The imagination, employed in prayer, unites mind, heart, and spirit, enabling a holistic experience of one’s relationship with God. Imaginative prayer is a focused, engaging manner of prayer. Imaginative prayer requires the person of faith to form mental images of the self and of God. Such image formation is difficult, as it must take into account all of our conceptions of God (and self), both positive and negative, that have formed throughout our faith history and personal development. A language is needed for imagination, and that language is metaphor. A context is needed as well – a context that will allow for correction and healing of those harmful, negative images. The foundation for that context for the Christian is the canon of Scripture. Scriptural metaphor awakens our imagination and speaks the language that allows the person of faith to commune with God through imaginative prayer.

These processes will be explored in this chapter. Special attention will be given to the work of Gregory Boyd in the field of imaginative prayer, Arnold Modell in the field of brain science and mental imaging, Barry and Ann Ulanov in the field of imagination and mental imaging, Zoltan Kovecses in the field of general metaphor theory, and Sallie McFague in the field of religious metaphor theory. The chapter will
conclude with a look at the scriptural concept of image and the basis for the use of metaphorical imagery to speak of God.

Imaginative Prayer and Resting in God

Communion with God is anchored within the context of resting in God. Such resting allows the imagination to be fruitful apart from both distraction and the sense of striving toward God that can sometimes characterize prayer and spiritual discipline in general. When the person of faith rests in God, she allows God’s truth and grace to embrace her while, out of that experience, God guides her thoughts, feelings, and spiritual insights. The pray-er does not lose her individuality or personhood in such a prayer, but the Holy Spirit works through her to connect her to God in a healing expression of union with God. The mind, heart, and spirit are no longer left to their own devices; the person of faith does not conjure up God in her imagination. God meets her in the deep recesses of the mind, heart, and spirit that sometimes the person of faith cannot access alone.

Imaginative prayer takes the person of faith beyond a compartmentalized faith of only head, heart, or spirit and leads her into a faith that is real. Boyd contrasts the contemporary Christian obsession with what is true with the more pressing concern of what is real. “We believe God exists and cares about us,” he states, “but never or rarely have a profound experience of this truth.” The person of faith is primarily trained through the ministry of the local church to know about God, but not to know God. The ministry of the local church must extend beyond the theoretical to the practical level of

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offering persons of faith opportunities to “rest in an experience of Jesus as real.” If pastors will commit to actively praying deeply with their parishioners, then parishioners will begin to seek out such experiences on their own.

This real, experiential practice of prayer through resting in God is best done in the imagination, for engagement with the imagination allows the person of faith to enter into an active participation in the sometimes unseen elements of the life of God. Boyd notes the following about the imagination: “people who are passionate about prayer tend to be people who, usually without knowing it, use their imagination in prayer.” Such prayer becomes participatory and active, instead of the passive prayer of words alone. Thought and feeling become activate within the imagination, forming new possibilities and new worlds within the person of faith. Intimacy with God deepens as the person of faith prays “with all five senses.” When speaking of persons who pray in such ways, Boyd affirms that

They may ‘picture’ Jesus in their minds when they talk to him. They may “hear” Jesus responding to their words when they pray. They may “see” with the “mind’s eye” the person they’re praying for and perhaps imaginatively signify that the person they’re praying for and perhaps imaginatively signify that the person being prayer for is benefitting from the prayer. In this way, the prayer of communion might grow into an others’ focused intercessory prayer.

Richard Foster speaks of this experience of imaginative intercession when he recalls a pastoral prayer for a young child, in which Foster invited the older sibling of the child to place hands upon the ill child. Then Foster asked him to imagine with him Jesus walking

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7 Ibid., 14.  
8 Ibid., 15.  
9 Ibid., 126.  
10 Ibid., 15.
into the room, joining their hands, while the light of his presence filtered through them into the ill child.\textsuperscript{11}

Boyd contrasts this style of prayer with the typical prayer experience of speaking and petitioning through contrasting the focus on \textit{being} vs. the focus on \textit{acting}. Though action is necessary for the follower of Christ, it cannot precede the act of being. It is out of our experience with being the child of God that we can act as the children of God. Yet, as he notes, the person of faith often employs “the ‘try harder’ solution [that] assumes these commands [of God] are given to motivate us to become something we aren’t presently.”\textsuperscript{12} This is a great deception of the religious experience, and must be countered with the truth that “what the believer is called to do is based on who the believer \	extit{already is}.”\textsuperscript{13} It is in encountering and communing with God through imaginative prayer – in which the person of faith spends time with God for the sake of being with God and in which the person of faith learns that God desires to spend time with her for the sake of spending time with her – that the person of faith learns most intimately who she is. Out of this experiential knowledge, Christian faithfulness in action can properly be initiated.

There is, therefore, discipline in imaginative prayer, but no striving. The person of faith must open herself to God and allow God deep access into her innermost being. The imagination of imaginative prayer is not a surface-level daydream. Neither is the prayer left dry, formulaic, or unfocused as spoken, spontaneous prayer can often become. The prayer of imaginative communion is both deeply personal and experiential. In this

\textsuperscript{11} Foster, \textit{Celebration of Discipline}, 41-42.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
way, the prayer becomes formative. Boyd emphasizes this aspect of imaginative prayer when he affirms that “it’s not what we believe intellectually that impacts us; it’s what we experience as real.” The person of faith no longer simply petitions God or speaks toward God, but she meets God in her formational core. Out of that core, the person of faith is invited to live for God in freedom and integrity.

Mental Imaging

How does the imagination work, though, and is it reliable for such an important spiritual matter as prayer? Some might be biased against the imagination as a merely subjective reality within our complete control. Its use in prayer, then, would signify an attempted manipulation of God and spiritual realities. The imagination, however, works at a subconscious level beyond our abilities to control and manipulate. The imagination connects to the untapped possibilities and powers of the brain. The subject is accessed through the imagination, but this is the subject outside of the purposeful influences of that subject. The deepest parts of the being of the praying subject are opened and exposed to the holy Subject. Through this process the subject uses an expanded amount of brain power, or “mind,” accessing multiple layers of consciousness, memory, senses, and the subject reaches deeper, rarely accessed aspects of being. It is in this communion between subject and Subject that the whole self is opened to God.

Mental imaging corresponds to the ways in which we first learn of the world around us. We produce mental images, and use these mental images to construct meaning, long before we can express this in speech. “Animals,” Modell notes, “do not

14 Ibid., 13.
require language to recognize an image." Modell appeals to Pavlov’s classic behavioral training of dogs to remind us that certain experiences take place in the imaging capacities of the mind before they are fully experienced. The imagination prepares the one imagining for the actual event ahead. For instance, “expectancy,” such as the expectancy of a dog for food when a bell rings, “refers to the immediate future, and the future can only be imagined.”

This is true of the highest animal, human beings, as well. A child recognizes the image of his mother or father before he can form the words “momma” and “dada.” The child might also associate the image of the parent with the expectation of nourishment or emotional satisfaction. Ann Ulanov writes that “Our pictures of God come from the memories of real experience of dependency on our parents and their responses to us.”

Language is simply the interpretive framework given to that which has already been found true by the imaginative mind. That which is named has been experienced, expected, or hoped for. The imagination connects what has been with what can be, building together a foundation for the present. Just as the dog hearing Pavlov’s bell uses its limited “imagination” to foresee the morsel that comes from beyond its own power (it is, after all, at the mercy of the hand that feeds it), so too the infant uses its still-developing imagination to foresee the comfort or nourishment of the parent (on whom it is also wholly dependent). This demonstrates what Modell affirms when he states that

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16 Ibid., 111-12.
“although one’s imagination is autonomous…imagination can be constricted.”\(^{18}\) No one would argue that the imaginations of the dog or infant, limited as they are, have been “hacked” from the outside, but there are significant outside influences upon their imaginations. We cannot affirm “attempts to understand the inner world of the human psyche [as]…a ‘closed system.’”\(^{19}\)

The more developed adult imagination is susceptible to outside influence as well. Both Modell and Boyd affirm the effects the memory can have on both the imagination and the present experience of consciousness. When facing present situations that trigger a memory, “the imagined scene, created from memories…[is] transposed to the present.”\(^{20}\) Such memories are not mere cognitive facts being recalled by the mind. Boyd writes that “a memory…is a…virtual re-experience.”\(^{21}\) Memories, the act of “imaginatively replicating reality in our minds,”\(^{22}\) take on a past-experienced-in-the-present character. Modell notes:

> Memory is not representational…Memory is not a store of fixed or coded attributes. Instead, memory consists of a process of continual recategorization, which must involve continued motor activity and repeated rehearsal.\(^{23}\)

Memory is lived and it is lived through the imagination. “Imagination is not possible without memory,” says Modell, “but neither is memory possible without imagination.”\(^{24}\)


\(^{19}\) Boyd, *Seeing*, 129.


\(^{21}\) Boyd, *Seeing*, 115, author’s emphasis.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 72.


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 126.
This experience of the imagination is felt viscerally; it touches all aspects of the person’s being. In this way, accessing imaginative memory creates meaning. “We become what we imaginatively see,” claims Boyd. If the mother or father, whom the infant imaginatively remembers as “the one who feeds and comforts me,” fails to provide the expected nourishment or comfort, the infant will create meaning around an imagination of scarcity, want, and distrust. The image, not just the mere thought, of an authority figure will become an image that inspires a negative experience of meaning. If the mother or father are faithful in their parental duties toward the infant, authority will be experienced more positively – perhaps even as an aid to self-fulfillment. The way we have experienced any element of the world, and the way in which we have remembered that experience, will thoroughly impact the way we imaginatively know, ascribe meaning to, and access the world of the present.

The Religious Imagination

What we come to expect of God and how we ascribe meaning to our connection with God will reflect the way we have experienced the world. One will notice that this does not mean that one’s view of God will be affected solely by how that person experiences God. The way a person of faith has related to her parents, her peers, even the inanimate word around her will color the way she imagines and, by effect, experiences God. If the world has treated her poorly, through continued sufferings of social injustice, for example, she might struggle with the God who created what is, in her imaginative memory, an unjust world. How is such a reality changed so that she can experience God positively? Imaginative prayer, we would say, is such a perspective shifting practice. In

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25 Boyd, Seeing, 94.
imaginative prayer the person of faith “perceives” God. Modell notes that “imagination [is] the self entering into what it perceives…which may be accompanied by a temporary sense of merging.”\textsuperscript{26} The divine Self relates to the human self and meaning (and by extension, the human self itself) is transformed. “It appears,” Modell writes, “that we do not have a word that denotes this total, conscious and unconscious, affective impact that one mind has upon another.”\textsuperscript{27} In the Christian experience, \textit{communion} would suffice.

How, then, will the person of faith, especially the one with a negative conception of God perceive God in imaginative prayer? One must create new meaning around the experience of God by relating to new images of God. New images, in this sense, does not necessarily mean that the images must be novel, but images around which no significant meaning, or at least no significantly negative meaning, has been developed. Such images will, admittedly, be difficult to find in a world in which, consciously or subconsciously, almost every imagination has been assessed with meaning. After all, “the primordial task faced by the brain is that of labeling an unlabeled world,”\textsuperscript{28} yet for the adult not much is left unlabeled.

It might also be necessary to reassign meaning to images, thus making them “new.” In this process, “we [do] not take the object as something given to us but as something formed through our imagination.”\textsuperscript{29} The negatively labeled world is \textit{reformed} through a different, positive experience situated within the imagination. If life has “given” the person of faith an image of God that serves as an obstacle to communion with

\textsuperscript{26} Modell, \textit{Imagination}, 119.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 119-20.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 119.
God, she is not destined to continue receiving that image. In approaching the process humbly, willing to recognize that her constructed images might not be the final image for God and the world, the person of faith can reimagine the images in a new context with new positivity, and the image of God can be reformed. Reimagining is reformation; God does not change in God’s eternal character, but the way the person of faith receives that character changes.

Such a process is natural to us and, therefore, can be embraced with some discipline. Ann Belford Ulanov affirms that “God has created us as image-creating creatures.”

God understands, then, that the image-creating activity of human beings, as with all of our faculties, are imperfect and in danger of distortion. Distortion, under God’s power, is subject to healing and reformation. Healing demands an honest assessment of the situation. The person of faith must confront the images of God—positive or negative—that already exist within her. Ulanov writes that “if we neglect our God-images…we get a religion of words instead of experiences of the living Word.” The person of faith might be tempted to cover over negative images of God with orthodox doctrinal beliefs and statements. It is not that orthodoxy is unimportant, but orthodoxy must flow out of authentic communion with God. Theology is secondary to religious experience, acting as the language persons of faith use to explain what has happened in their interactions with God. Positive images can produce a positive, orthodox theology; orthodox theology can never fully reform negative images of God.

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31 Ibid., 168.
“The language of primary-process thinking,” Ulanov affirms, “is not verbal…but comes in pictures.”

The locus of image change is found in the practice of prayer. Ulanov reminds her readers that images are constructed through the interplay between introjection and projection. The person of faith receives external stimuli internally, forms meaning based on that experience, and then projects that meaning back on God. *God becomes what the person of faith experiences.* In imaginative prayer, the person of faith receives an image from God, reforms meaning based on God’s perspective, and has her personal image projected back to her from God. As Ulanov writes:

Prayer is conversation with an other who is altogether different from us and our subjective needs and wishes and altogether present to us in its differences. That is what is so threatening about prayer – its speech is so personal, so intimate, and yet the conversation we conduct through it is open-ended. We provide our most private, our most guarded, our most secret wishes and fears and wait to hear, to learn, and to perceive the response that will come back to us. Our images of God begin this process of confiding. But the open-endedness of the conversation that follows soon goes far past those images and causes them to fade, even to break away completely.

Imaginative prayer invites the person of faith to recognize how God has appeared to her, even in her confusion of images, to confess the inadequacy of those images (no matter how positive), and to construct new images and meanings. In this way, imaginative prayer mirrors the Wesleyan process of grace – prevenient grace drawing us to God before we are aware of God, justifying grace restoring our relationship with God, and sanctifying grace drawing us closer to God in increased intimacy.

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33 Ibid., 28.
Imaginative prayer, then, demands a change from the person of faith, even if that change is not total reformation but a continuation of formational growth. The person of faith must be prepared for the intensely personal nature of this process. She is dealing with a lifetime of self-perspective and her conception of the divine. “Negative images can wound people for decades,”34 according to Ulanov and Ulanov, and once these images are confessed there will be no allowance for further suppression or denial. The world of imaginative prayer is a world of healing, but such healing only comes with great struggle. Imaginative prayer, then, is not a fanciful exercise relegated to religious dreamers. Imaginative prayer is the place where real life meets divine power, where God is not talked around but confronted. In as much, imaginative prayer produces freedom and demands freedom. Ulanov cautions that “to neglect God-images…means that they are free to gather power to knock us over.”35 The person of faith, in submitting her images of God to God’s transformative power, regains agency over the images that have shaped her. The hope found in this practice is that we, as persons of faith, “see in our pictures of God what we have left out of ourselves, to bring back those pieces and try to house them…reminding us as we do so that we can never get to that meeting of self and other except through our pictures.”36 Ultimately, the person of faith becomes who she imagines herself to be in relation to her image of God.

In forming new images of God, the key element is freedom. The Holy Spirit works in freedom. This does not mean that guidance is unneeded. In fact, guidance

35 Ulanov, Picturing God, 170.
36 Ibid., 179.
allows the person of faith to avoid over-subjectivity and the same negative obstacles previously developed. Within this guidance, though, freedom must be maintained. As Ulanov and Ulanov note, “prescriptions crowd out the imagination”\(^\text{37}\) and thwart the free agency necessary for spiritual growth. Freedom must be granted not only to God and the person of faith, but to the images themselves. When dealing with formative images in the powerfully charged arena of religious experience, the person of faith must be prepared to encounter “images…that address, summon, and even judge us.” The person’s images of God are the vehicle to access to God. If God must exist as the subjective Other in the human-divine relationship, then the images must be recognized as outside of the person of faith, an “other” in relation to that person, with a power all their own.

It must further be understood that the images are not God in Godself. Images are not God and God is not a mere image; God transcends all images. They are access points to God and means of grace. Just as Sartre affirms that imagining a chair or his friend Pierre is not the same as beholding the chair or Pierre in their ontological fullness, mentally accessing images of God does not mean we are beholding God. We are accessing that point of mystery in which we behold God through the use of our images of God. According to Sartre, “To have an idea of chair is to have a chair in consciousness...[and the image] is reached only very indirectly...only by the fact that [it] is what the portrait [or image] represents.”\(^\text{38}\) To have a God-consciousness is not the same as beholding God; however, one can only behold God if that God-consciousness is cultivated. Images of God ready the person of faith for an encounter, a beholding, of

\(^{37}\) Ulanov and Ulanov, *Healing Imagination*, 70.
God. The mystic union between human and God is as yet a step beyond imaging and imaginative prayer. God is the chief mover in such matters. Imaginative prayer prepares the person of faith for that encounter.

Such consciousness, though, does bear witness to the reality of that which we are conscious. “All consciousness,” Sartre affirms, “is consciousness of something.” To be conscious of God is to affirm that God is present, God is real, God is to be experienced. To imagine God in the first place is to recognize that God has been experienced already. There is an awareness of God because God is already there. God is an objective reality, and as such God has a specific character. Images of God reveal that specific character of God. Sartre goes on to state that “In a sense these qualities [of an image or consciousness] are not properties of the object” per se, but “they make the sense of the object.” No one image can represent absolutely the infinite God, even though a plethora of images might be able to give the finite mind of the person of faith an impression of God and produce the right conditions to experience this God to the best of human capabilities.

This is why one must hold her image of God tentatively, though with seriousness. Images allow the person of faith to access God, but if those images fail her, she must move to the next. God will be God and the person of faith will still able to access God. No single image, no matter how powerful, is adequate to give the person of faith a full representation of God. Images of God are needed, diverse and providing multiple points of access to God. The converse is that no image, no matter how damaging, is powerful

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39 Ibid., 69, author’s emphasis.
40 Ibid.
enough to separate the person of faith from God. Any old image can be overcome and any new image can bring refreshment and reformation in the search for God. Whatever image works for one person might not work for another. The image that reminds one person of his hurtful past might be the same image that another person has been searching for to open her to the work of God. The former must reject that image of God (or have it reimagined) and the latter must accept that image of God, though the image remains objectively the same. Ulanov affirms this necessarily careful handling of images:

Only if we keep them as images of God do we have a chance to keep a foot in reality too. What should grow into a symbol will instead get stuck in a symbolic equation…Then we equate God’s mystery with [a] human notion…We substitute image for reality and forsake the help of the image in penetrating God’s mystery…[and] take something that might be a passageway and make it a closed door. Then our image reflects us instead of showing through its mirror the God who peers at us through this intimate experience.41

The experience of God is always the goal of the implementation of images of God within the spiritual practices of the person of faith.

Speaking Metaphorically of God

How, then, can the person of faith imagine God confidently, in a manner that opens the consciousness to God, sets a clear path toward beholding God through communing with and resting in God, and prevents the person of faith from confusing the image itself with God? The answer is metaphor. If imaginative prayer is the vehicle in which the person of faith communes with God, then metaphor is the fuel. Sallie McFague has argued for the centrality of metaphor in speaking of God, arguing that, apart from simply knowledge of God, “there would be no known fact or truth…without

41 Ulanov, Picturing God, 170.
metaphor.” In writing about metaphor, Zoltan Kovecses affirms that “this way of speaking about life would be regarded by most speakers of English as normal and natural for everyday purposes.” If metaphor is foundational for natural speaking, thinking, and processing, then it is essential for speaking, thinking, and processing the reality of the supernatural.

Kovecses breaks down metaphors into the two constitutive parts of the source domain and the target domain. “Conceptual metaphors,” he writes, “typically employ a more abstract concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source.” What is unknown is understood through the known. In employing religious metaphor the person of faith can access the seemingly inscrutable God, “seeing” the invisible God through mentally imaging what has been touched, tasted, smelled, seen, and heard. To say that “God is $x$” or “God is like $x$” is to make a statement about the character, nature, or actions of God. God is not ontologically $x$, but God can be understood – partly, of course – in the same manner in which a person understands $x$.

Let us take, as an example, the metaphor of wind to speak of the Holy Spirit. Wind is a meteorological phenomenon that each of us has experienced, to one degree or another, on most days in our lifetime. Wind consists of certain air molecules moving at a more rapid speed than the air molecules around them. Obviously, the Holy Spirit is not a meteorological phenomenon consisting of the movement of air. This comparison, though, has a long theological history rooted in Scripture. In the very opening lines of

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44 Ibid., 7.
Scripture, we get a picture of the Holy Spirit as a wind hovering over the waters of primordial creation. The word \textit{ruah} in the Old Testament is alternatively translated as wind, breath, or spirit.\footnote{For instance, see Genesis 6:3 (spirit), Genesis 6:17 (breath), and Genesis 8:1 (wind).} Jesus speaks of the nature of the Holy Spirit as wind in his conversation with Nicodemus.\footnote{John 3} Luke describes the movement of the Holy Spirit among the disciples on the day of Pentecost through appealing to the source domain of wind.\footnote{Acts 2} There is perhaps no more ethereal reality of God’s being as the Holy Spirit, and wind seems to be an appropriate metaphor to understand this mysterious target Subject.

What is said, then, of the Holy Spirit through this wind metaphor? There are qualities of wind that speak to the qualities of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the creation is swirling in creative force as the winds over a lake ripple and move the water in new directions. The Holy Spirit is like breath to our soul, as the person of faith inhales life as one would inhale the air off the wind. One cannot contain the Holy Spirit and the Spirit moves as the Spirit pleases, just as the wind, unable to be bottled, rushes through the trees or over a plain as wildly as it pleases. Just as wind can gather in such force and become a power to reckon with in the form of a tornado or hurricane, the Holy Spirit gathers in force and powerfully moves through the disciples and the world to give birth to the Church.

We must remember, however, Sallie McFague’s words cited earlier: “the new thing is both like \textit{and} unlike the old.”\footnote{Sallie McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 18.} The Holy Spirit, in our example, is not the wind
and cannot be understood solely in such physical ways. “It is the divine character that shines through [the] physical features that is important,” Boyd reminds us, “not [the] physical appearance itself.”49 The person of faith deals with God in the realm of the metaphysical while anchored in the realm of the physical. Any utilization of metaphorical representations of God will only take the person of faith so far in her understanding. Conversely, any physical element of creation has the potential to point the person of faith to God. When the mind is conditioned to think in these manners, an awareness of God is cultivated.

This resulting awareness of God will take place on an unconscious level as well as on a conscious level. Modell notes that “the neural correlates of a metaphoric process are likely to be nonlinear.”50 When the body senses wind, for instance, the brain can learn to connect this feeling not only with the movement of air upon the skin, but, when the metaphorical understanding of the Holy Spirit is cultivated, the brain can connect this with a sensitivity to or awareness of the presence of God. The person of faith does not actively say to herself, “It is windy and the Holy Spirit is referred to as wind in Scripture, and therefore I feel that God is present.” The brain can become wired in such a way that this reaction will be automatic. The experience of wind becomes a doorway into experiencing the Holy Spirit, without the Holy Spirit becoming identified narrowly and naively as mere wind, or even without the person of faith consciously connecting the experience of wind with the experience of the Spirit. “The ‘play’ of visual images

49 Boyd, Seeing, 111.
50 Modell, Imagination, 34.
and…the play of muscular (kinesthetic) sensations…,” writes Modell, “are the products of an unconscious metaphoric process.”

One might ask, “isn’t this process spiritually manipulative, training the mind to sense what is not there? Cannot any spiritual awareness, then, be explained by our response to physical stimuli?” Consider what happens when you walk into a room next to a kitchen in which chocolate chip cookies are baking. The smell wafts into your nostrils and your mouth begins to water and you recognize a hunger that was not present when you first walked into the room. The hunger is real, and you become convinced beyond any reason that the only thing that will satisfy that hunger is a rich, buttery chocolate chip cookie! After experiencing chocolate chip cookies since your childhood, you have developed a keen desire for chocolate chip cookies. This is not an artificial hunger that would not exist if the person in the next room were not baking cookies. In a sense, you always have a latent hunger for chocolate chip cookies, always ready to eat them when available. In a much broader sense, you have a general hunger that stays with you throughout your day and demands satiation by all manner of foods. The smell merely awakened your general hunger that is always present and your specific hunger that is latently present. The subconscious identification of God’s presence with the physical elements of creation is simply a process of connecting one’s hunger for God with the stimuli available to people of faith in the ordinary experience of the world.

Beyond giving the person of faith an opportunity to awaken to God’s presence, metaphor allows the person of faith to process and speak of that experience. Conceptual metaphors (God is x…) consist of specific mappings (…because God does y in the same

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51 Ibid., 30.
way $x$ does $y$) to help make sense of the metaphor and what the metaphor is trying to communicate. As Kovecses writes,

To know a conceptual metaphor is to know the set of mappings that applies to a given source-target pairing. It is these mappings that provide much of the meaning of the metaphorical linguistic expressions (or linguistic metaphors) that make a particular conceptual metaphor manifest.\(^{52}\)

The significance of the metaphor is constructed through these mappings. It is not enough to simply say God is $x$. Substituting any image for $x$ will not necessarily produce meaning. One must know why God is like $x$ for the metaphor to have an impact. An entire language can be built around our metaphorical understanding of God. In effect, this is what theology is – a mapping of the metaphors of God. This is why experience of God must precede theology. Metaphors work in the unconscious state to keep the person of faith aware of God and in communion with God. Theology is formed as the language used to describe that communion.

What, then, are the metaphors that can be used for God and which can develop a robust theological language around them? The person of faith is looking for those metaphors through which “the familiar and sensuous is used to evoke the unfamiliar, and, on the other hand, the unfamiliar context or frame in which the familiar is set allows [the person of faith] to see the ordinary in a new way.”\(^ {53}\) In other words, what is the person of faith familiar with that can reveal God and what are those mundane elements of life that might re-contextualize to increase awareness of the divine presence?


McFague immediately turns to the image of God as Father, but cautions her readers that “many metaphors are necessary…for…we have no one way to a thing.”\textsuperscript{54} The image of God as Father, she argues, has fallen into one (or both) of the two danger zones for religious metaphor: idolatry and irrelevance. A new way is needed to allow the person of faith to progress toward God. “No one model can ever be adequate…” she stresses, but “…a piling up of images is essential, both to avoid idolatry and to attempt to express the richness and variety of the divine-human relationship.”\textsuperscript{55} An image of God as Father no longer works for many people in a world of expressive, empowered femininity and in which men have been the longstanding sources of oppression and injustice. Those, however, who resist the release of such an image for God are dangerously close to committing idolatry, making the name “Father” more important than the name “God.” If the person of faith grasps too tightly to this, or any single, religious metaphor than the “richness and multivalency are sacrificed”\textsuperscript{56} in the expression of faith. As McFague notes:

The issues of idolatry and irrelevance come together in the image of God as father, for more than any other dominant model in Christianity, this one has been both absolutized by some and, in recent times, found meaningless by others. The feminist critique of God as father centers on the dominance of this one model to the exclusion of others, and on the failure of this model to deal with the anomaly presented by those who experience is not included in this model.\textsuperscript{57}

Special caution needs to be taken when leading groups or individuals in imaginative prayer practices that utilize religious metaphors to not potentially restrict

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 50-51.
\textsuperscript{55} McFague, \textit{Metaphorical Theology}, 20, author’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 145.
access to God due to issues surrounding gender. When anthropomorphic metaphors are used, in which either gender could be represented, the gender should be left ambiguous. For instance, with the religious metaphor of God as monarch, God should not explicitly be referred to a participant as king or queen. If these specifics are used, such as in a situation where multiple images of God as monarch are utilized, they should only be used in tandem with opposite-gender manifestations. One gendered metaphor that could be excluded from these restrictions is the metaphor of God as mother, since this has been balanced with millennia of representations of God as the male parent.

Ann Belford Ulanov recognizes this need for new images of God and the overuse of more traditional images of God. She writes the following:

We see examples of how serious the neglect of [the] unconscious life of images can be in the loss of faith so many people suffer today. Their own faith is not alive or they cannot take hold of the images that are available in tradition, in Scripture…The images people have within themselves and the images that are available in tradition and Scripture do not touch. They do not ignite one another. A gap exists between them.58

Her caution, echoing McFague, comes with a counter-caution as well. The human being is adept at making idols. In reaction to the traditional images of God the person of faith can swing to the opposite extreme and completely discount traditional images of God and make their own idols, in their own image. Creating God is the image of the self is an ever-present temptation for the person of faith. In nearly the very next breath, Ulanov tempers her earlier statement:

We get, nowadays, persons’ private God-pictures made public as the new, official images of God. In the last decade…God has been dead, red, black, female, gay, [and] revolutionary… equating our symbol for God

58 Ulanov, Picturing God, 167.
with God and expecting others to agree…We push our neighbor to adopt what is real to us without looking to see what is real to our neighbor.  

There must be room made for the traditional and iconoclastic visions of God within the life of the person of faith and the corporate life of the community of faith.

McFague reminds her readers that the personal manifestations of God are the most enriching. “Personal, relational images are central in a metaphorical theology…[for] the Judeo-Christian tradition has always been personalistic and relational in its religious languages.”

I would argue that it is not only the language of the Judeo-Christian tradition that is such, but the goals of that tradition as well. Christianity is a faith built upon relationship, and communion with God is the chief end of the person of faith. While there is a need for nonorganic images of God to communicate the character of God, these must be balanced, heavily, with organic, living, relating images of God – be they human images or images from the animal and plant kingdom where relationship still exists, albeit on a different level than the human level. The person employ religious metaphor to relate to God; this is the whole purpose of such envisioning. Any other goal of metaphorical theology and imaginative prayer is meaningless.

In view of all this, McFague proposes that the ideal metaphor for God in this age is the “nonfamilial, non-gender-related” metaphor of God as friend. This metaphor has traditional and scriptural support and is relevant to the experience of people. McFague writes that “friendship expresses that ideal of relationship among peoples of all ages, both sexes, and whatever color or religion. It is an increasingly important metaphor for us on

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59 Ibid., 170-71.
60 McFague, Metaphorical Theology, 20.
61 Ibid., 178.
the human level.”62 This is not, however, a perfect metaphor – as none are. McFague recognize what I would argue is the chief drawback of this metaphor, that is “the issue of authority between friends.”63

Though she cites many positive qualities of friends in a way that relates to God’s character, McFague identifies the most positive, foundational aspect of this metaphor when she writes of the friend’s “identification with the needs and sufferings of others.”64 The greatest quality and gift of friendship is unconditional, unjudging presence. She writes beautifully of “the God…’alongside’…who travels with us and shares our experience.”65 In this sense, God as friend could be a powerful metaphor.

The caution is that envisioning God as friend could lead the immature or inexperienced believer or the beginner in metaphorical, imaginative prayer, to conceptualize God as benign and overly accommodating. McFague admits “that the principal overriding characteristic of friendship as a mode of relating to another is ‘maturity.’”66 Jesus did not call his disciples his friends until the very end of his ministry; the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, who was promised as the one who would walk alongside the disciples came on the day of Pentecost after a season of committed prayer following the ascension of the resurrected Christ. Growth was needed before the disciples could receive this image without exploiting it. While this would be a positive, comforting, and helpful image of God for the person of faith who has explored the more

62 Ibid., 179.
63 Ibid., 182.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 183.
66 Ibid., 182-83.
particular aspects of God’s character, it is not the image to employ for the person of faith for whom the practice of imaginative prayer is approached as a novice.

Scripture, Image, and Metaphor

The use of metaphor to understand God and the use of the imagination to see what is unseen reflects the incarnational nature of God that is the foundation of the Christian faith. John affirms in his gospel that “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Notice the emphasis on the ability to see glory – a characteristic of the divine nature – in the incarnate Word. That which is unseen with natural faculties is seen through a recontextualization of divinity. God is seen, visually and through the actions of the incarnate Word, as the Word “tabernacles” among humanity in the tangibility of flesh. The human experience acts as the source domain, a source domain all human beings can relate to, in this holy metaphor. God, who can seem so difficult to access and relate to, is the target domain further revealed in the metaphor. The actions of Jesus, his words, his miracles, and his compassion act as the metaphor’s mapping structure, allowing humanity to process and produce meaning out of the incarnational experience of the Word. The invisible becomes the visible within the mind of the person of faith as metaphors for God are made incarnate in the imagination.

The concept of the image of God has featured prominently in revelation, appearing as a central theme in the very first chapter of Genesis. It is written, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female

\[67\] John 1:14, emphasis added.
he created them."\(^{68}\) This forms the very foundation of Christian anthropology. Human beings are created in the image of God, therefore God must have an image and it is vital to fulfilling our human purpose that we comprehend that image. If we do not know the image of God, how can we reflect the image of God? The Hebrew word for image in this passage is from the root *tselem*. In the Old Testament this root word is used to speak alternatively about offspring, golden carvings, idols, and shadows. A *tselem* is something created as a representation of something else, something that points to a reality beyond itself. In this way, a *tselem* is almost a metaphor in and of itself. Human beings are the metaphors of God. The human experience becomes a metaphor by which human beings can understand the divine nature. The corresponding Greek term used to translate *tselem* in the Greek Old Testament and used in the original of the New Testament is the word *eikon*, from which we get our English word *icon*. This root is used to refer to idols in the New Testament, but more importantly for the person of faith it is used to implore followers of Christ to reflect Christ in character in the way that Christ reflected God.

Since Scripture affirms that "no one has ever seen God,"\(^{69}\) how does the person of faith know how to reflect God? The simple answer is to look at the effects of God, the character and nature of God as revealed through direct revelation. There is another way, however, that is being advocated for here and has grounding in one of the most intimate human-divine encounters in Scripture. In the thirty-third chapter of Exodus, it is written:

Moses said [to the LORD], "Show me your glory, I pray." And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the LORD

\(^{68}\) Genesis 1:27.

\(^{69}\) John 1:18.
continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."\textsuperscript{70}

Moses desired to see the LORD and the LORD desired to reveal Godself to Moses. However, for Moses to see the LORD in the fullness of divine glory, Moses was required to look at God \textit{indirectly}. Even earlier in this chapter, where it somewhat confusingly states that “the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend,”\textsuperscript{71} this speaking is mediated through the indirect image of God in the pillar of cloud. It is entirely possible that the phrase “face to face” is an idiomatic metaphor that modifies the further statement “as one speaks to a friend.” “Face to face,” in that instance, would refer to the \textit{nature} of their relational experience, not a physical description of that experience.

All human-divine interactions, even those seemingly unmediated free acts of prayer, rely on beholding God indirectly. Human beings desire to see God’s face; if one looks carefully, perhaps the back of God will pass by quickly.

Such an experience, still, seemed to satisfy Moses and give the Israelites the motivation needed to complete their wilderness wanderings. Even a glimpse of God can produce powerful results in the life of the person of faith. Individual metaphors used to speak of God in Scripture each give us a glimpse of God’s nature and character. These metaphors are all easily accessible to the human experience. When taken together, the person of faith can begin to piece together a picture of God that will make communion with God more accessible. God becomes more real, the abstraction of divine mystery becomes more concrete, and these images can be “played” with in the imagination.

\textsuperscript{70} Exodus 33:18-23.
\textsuperscript{71} Exodus 33:11
Multiple authors, across multiple genres of writing within Scripture, have turned to similar metaphors to describe God and their experiences of God. As we have seen from Sallie McFague, *father* and *friend* are two such metaphors.

There are certainly metaphors that could be used by the person of faith to understand the nature of God better that do not appear in Scripture because the human experiences that serve as the source domain were not part of the human experience or human awareness of ancient times. For instance, the activity of God in speaking to humanity might be understood through the metaphor of radio transmissions. The Holy Spirit could be compared to radio waves that move throughout the world around us unperceived until we tune in to the correct frequency. There is nothing evidently problematic about such a metaphor and its use in raising the person of faith’s awareness and understanding of God’s nature. The creative God will continue to do creative work in the minds of people of faith as they discover new aspects of God’s created realm.

For the purpose of this study, though, we will concentrate solely on metaphors that appear in Scripture. Scripture is an anchoring reality for the person of faith in the Christian tradition. Also, when persons are beginning to intentionally explore the nature of God through the use of metaphor, it is important to begin with the basics. The chance of misunderstanding God through the use of a novel metaphor is lessened when dealing with metaphors tested and validated by millennia of religious experience. As the person of faith develops her capacities to engage God through metaphor, the exploration of more novel metaphors can be encouraged. For now, according to Boyd, “we must allow Scripture to inform us so that we form a true notion of God.”

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72 Boyd, *Seeing*, 137.
by which all others will be held accountable. Since McFague has done substantial work on the scriptural metaphors of *father* and *friend*, and for the reasons cited above, these will not be explored in this study. Both, however, remain important in the process of forming a positive image of God and must be used in balance with those explored in this study and others as they become available to the person of faith. The ten metaphors for God explored in this study are: *rock, shepherd, bird, mother, fire, banquet host, spouse, warrior, gardener,* and *monarch*. It is to the study of these that we now turn.
CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING SCRIPTURAL METAPHOR

The scriptural metaphors for God explored in this study meet the following criteria: employed in both the Old and New Testaments, attested to by at least three biblical writers, and appears in more than one genre of biblical writing. Additionally, each metaphorical image must be used within Scripture to specifically refer to God, the character of God, and/or the activity of God. Each metaphorical image must lend itself to the practice of visualization. The metaphorical images employed in this study are easily reproducible in concrete visual form, as photography is the principal means by which the metaphors in this study are introduced to participants. For the purpose of manageability, this study is not inclusive of all biblical metaphors for God which meet the above stated criteria. While all metaphors for God used within this study meet the above stated criteria, final selection of the metaphors included has been made at the discretion of the researcher. These images were chosen for participants in order to introduce participants to imaginative engagement with God, with the understanding that participants will bring with them their own preconceptions of God.

The image of God as a rock is an impersonal, inorganic, and largely static image. Such images tell us more about God’s character than about the way in which God interacts with humankind. Like a rock, God is demonstrated in Scripture as stable,
strong, and a source of refuge. God is also viewed as a destructive force, as God the
Rock crushes and breaks apart others in judgement. This image, along with bird, fire and
gardener (and in some senses, shepherd), is one of many nature images for God employed
in Scripture and in this study.

The image of God as a shepherd is a relational, anthropomorphic image, though
one in which the relationship is hierarchical. The sheep are not the same species or of the
same station as the shepherd; the shepherd, in a sense, is *above* the sheep. The shepherd,
however, does not hold power over sheep oppressively, but protectively. The shepherd is
steward over the sheep, recognizing the importance and value of the “lower” species.
The shepherd is responsible for leading the sheep into good grazing and watering lands,
protecting them from harmful animals, and ensuring their growth and fruitful
reproduction.

Scripturally, this image is employed prominently by the psalmist who declares
“The LORD is my shepherd”73 and by Jesus who equates himself with the “Good
Shepherd.”74 The psalmist creates a metaphorical mapping that includes references to the
peace, provision, and comfort of God as green pastures, still waters, and the shepherd’s
rod. The metaphorical mapping that develops from Jesus’s use of the metaphor includes
a discussion of his sacrifice for humankind as related to a shepherd’s defense of the sheep
in his care. Those who follow Jesus are like sheep who recognize the voice of the
shepherd and go where the shepherd leads them. In all such examples, God is the
shepherd and humankind are the sheep.

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73 Psalm 23:1
74 John 10
The image of God as a bird is a relational, though not anthropomorphic, image. This is the only image used in this study (though not the only one employed in Scripture) in which God is entirely imaged as a non-human animal. Many facets of the nature of birds are used to correspond to the nature of God: power, elegance, swiftness, and the tendency to care well for their young. God is envisioned as an eagle, a dove, and even a mother hen in Scripture. The people of God are represented by the young birds being cared for or by those who benefit from the power and energy (such as the flight, protection, and strength) of the divine bird.

The image of God as a mother is a relational, anthropomorphic image. There is at least one instance, however, in which God is imagined as a non-human animal mother – the abovementioned mother hen imagery. This image is important in balancing the male-dominated imagery and language used most frequently in faith communities. God carries the people of God within the womb, nurses the children of faith, and provides umbilical strength to those who follow God. The manna imagery of Exodus and Numbers can be likened to breastmilk received daily by the hungry children of God. In this sense, God, like a mother, nourishes the people of God from within her own resources. Resting in God’s bosom, an Old Testament image reflected also in Jesus’s close relationship with John, is another mothering/nursing image. Along with shepherd, spouse, banquet host, and gardener (and to some extent, bird), this image emphasizes the nurturing character of God.

75 Matthew 23:27
76 Isaiah 40:11
77 John 13:23
The image of God as fire is an impersonal, inorganic, and yet largely active image. As with the image of God as rock, this image tells us about God’s character. In addition, God as a fire teaches us about God’s activity in the world. As a fire purifies metal and clears old growth away to make room and provide nutrients for new growth, God as fire cleanses the person of faith of impurities to begin the process of sanctification. This image employs destructive imagery, in which fire consumes sin and, at times, the sinful. There is positive imagery, however, also associated with fire. God, like fire, gives light and warmth and in the New Testament fire acts as evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence with the disciples.

The image of God as a spouse is a relational, anthropomorphic image. In our present culture, we would be right to call the spouse to spouse relationship egalitarian. It must be noted, however, that this relationship in the culture of the ancient Near East is hierarchical, with the husband having authority over the wife. Scripture offers a correction to this notion, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The creation narrative of Adam and Eve, found in Genesis 2, describes man and woman in terms of mutual station and intimacy. Paul, likewise, recognizes the need for mutual submission in the marriage relationship.\footnote{78 Ephesians 5:22-28}

When God is referred to as spouse in Scripture, this reference is most regularly in the form of the husband. When the spousal relationship is understood as egalitarian, this does not create an imbalance of power that would be created when viewing this metaphor from the dominant cultural view. Abuses, resulting from a misunderstanding of the spousal relationship as domineering instead of egalitarian, have been perpetrated against
wives by husbands in all cultures throughout the millennia. Care has been taken, therefore, to avoid any misunderstanding of the biblical witness of this metaphor. God as husband is expressed here as God as spouse, since the metaphor is intended in a self-giving, mutually submissive, egalitarian manner.

The image of God as a banquet host is a relational, anthropomorphic image, in which the relationship is characterized by service and hospitality. Whether it is in the presence of one’s enemies or in the glory and splendor of heaven, Scripture promises that God will provide sustenance to the faithful. The banquet imagery is often employed in eschatological fashion, reflecting the truest, unfiltered, and most enduring nature of God. This is who God is and who God will be throughout eternity. Like God as mother, God nurtures the people of faith by offering abundance from God’s own reserves. This image is intended to be an inviting image with warm and comforting overtones.

The image of God as a warrior is an anthropomorphic image, though not necessarily a relational image. This image primarily employs militaristic themes, though relationship could be understood in terms of the warrior fighting for someone or some group. This is how this metaphor is understood in Scripture, especially the Old Testament, in which God fights for Israel/the people of God. In the New Testament, God provides the faithful with armor in order to fight battles on God’s side. Jesus also brandishes a sword in John’s vision on Patmos. In the Old Testament, the warrior image for God is often employed in reference to actual fighting between human armies, while the New Testament writers mostly use this metaphor in reference to spiritual battles.

The image of God as a gardener is a relational, anthropomorphic image, though the one being related to in this image is not anthropomorphic. Human beings are
envisioned as plants – organic, but not sentient beings – and God is envisioned as the one who sows, waters, cares for, prunes, and harvests the plants. In this metaphor, the plant is completely at the mercy of the gardener. Along with God as Mother, this metaphor emphasizes the nurturing character of God. At times, the divine is imagined as a source plant that gives a foundation for dependent plants, as with Jesus’s image of himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches. However, the divine actor in this image is also envisioned as the anthropomorphic gardener, as the Father is envisioned as the vinedresser. God as Gardener is one of the earliest images of God given in Scripture, as God plants a garden in the newly formed creation in the second chapter of Genesis.

The image of God as a monarch is a relational, anthropomorphic image, in which the relationship is hierarchical. When God is referred to as monarch in Scripture, this reference is most regularly in the form of a king. Care has been taken, however, in this study to avoid gender-specific references, unless the gender is essential to the image (for example, God as mother in imagery of birthing and nursing). As mentioned in the discussion of God as spouse, this is due in large part to the historical prevalence of male dominance and abuse in which there is an imbalance of power present. God is often viewed as enthroned in the heavens, ruling over all creation from afar, but with imminent effects. Jesus takes on this universal royal character in the New Testament.

In this study, participants were invited into a process of exploring (1) the ways in which they imagine/visualize God and (2) the ways in which they use their imagination to connect to God. The setting of the former was subjective and dependent upon the general life experiences and specific faith experiences of the participant. The setting of the latter

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79 For instance, Psalm 103:19.
was objective and standardized for participants. There was ample opportunity, however, for each participant to customize his or her experience within these standardized, objective options.

All adult members/worshipers of the Byromville/Drayton United Methodist Charge were invited to participate in this process. Parishioners were invited to participate through an email correspondence. Seven persons volunteered as participants; three participants were female and four participants were male. The age of participants ranged from early-50s to mid-70s. The study took place from September 1 through November 2, 2017. Each interaction between the researcher and the participants took place in the library of the Byromville United Methodist Church.

Participants first met with the researcher, one on one, for a 90 minute session. The researcher began by asking the participant the following questions:

1. What is your earliest memory of using your imagination? How did you use your imagination as a child?

2. Do you consider yourself an imaginative person? How have you engaged your imagination throughout your life up until the present day?

3. When I say the word “God,” what image pops in your head? How do you visualize God in your mind?

4. What is God’s character/nature like? Tell me the three most important characteristics of God’s nature.

5. If you could take those three aspects of God’s character and visualize them, what would they look like?
Participants then explored different examples of biblical metaphors for God with the researcher. The metaphors presented and explored were, as noted above: God as Rock, God as Shepherd, God as Bird, God as Mother, God as Fire, God as Banquet Host, God as Spouse, God as Warrior, God as Gardener, and God as Monarch. The researcher and participant examined photographs that visually represented these ten particular biblical metaphors of God. Each of the ten metaphors was represented visually through four different photographs; a total of forty unique photographs were presented to the participant. Upon examining each of the photographs, participants were asked to identify the five photographs they connected most strongly with God. Participants were free to interpret this connection in any manner they saw fit: cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, etc. Once this connection with the visual images was established, the participants were given the opportunity to explain why they connected these particular images with God. The researcher then identified and discussed the significance of the biblical metaphors represented by the chosen photographs. As part of this discussion, the researcher shared a chart with the participant that detailed the Scriptural background and meaning for each of the ten metaphors.

By examining the pictures that each participant chose as visual representations of their connection to God and the biblical metaphors associated with them, the researcher and participant identified together a primary metaphor to which the participant connected. This was determined by the frequency of the metaphors represented by the chosen photographs. For instance, a participant would select five photographs that they felt connected to God. Two of those photographs might represent one metaphor (say, God as mother), while the other three chosen photographs might represent three separate
metaphors (say, God as gardener, God as rock, and God as fire). The researcher would then direct the participant to a deeper exploration of the metaphor that appeared more than once in their photograph choices (in this case, God as Mother). If multiple metaphors were represented equally, the researcher and participant would explore only one of these metaphors more deeply, chosen at the participant’s discretion. Participants were then encouraged to examine the other metaphors more deeply in their private work done in between sessions with the researcher.

The researcher then led the participant in a guided imaginative exercise, employing the metaphor for God the participant connected to most strongly. These guided imaginative exercises lasted approximately five to six minutes. During these exercises, participants were shown all four photographs that connected with that particular metaphor. After examining these photographs, they were asked (through the guided imaginative exercise) to mentally visualize themselves in the scenes represented by the photographs. For instance, if the metaphor being explored more deeply was “God as Mother,” the participant might be asked to imagine themselves being nursed by God, washed by God, held closely to God’s face, or protected and nourished within God’s womb. The guided imaginative exercise would also encourage them to explore their feelings elicited by this experience and to note what God might be communicating to them in this experience. Participants were encouraged to intentionally recognize God’s presence with them during the guided imaginative exercise. Upon completion of the guided imaginative exercise, the researcher and participant discussed the experience of visually imaging God through metaphor.
The participant was then invited to engage with at least five (out of ten available) guided imaginative exercises within their natural setting over the following weeks leading up to the next one on one session with the researcher. During these guided imaginative exercises, the participants were led through an audio recording. Each imaginative reflection lasted approximately five to six minutes and incorporated one of the ten biblical metaphors explored in this study. Participants were provided with a small journal by the researcher and invited to write any thoughts or notes that they wished to record after engaging in each guided imaginative exercise. These notes were for the participants’ personal use for further reflection and to organize their thoughts for further discussion. Participants were able, but not required, to share any written notes of their choosing with the researcher in the second one on one session. The researcher provided reminders to the participants to continue engaging with these guided reflections through telephone calls, text messages, and/or personal, face to face encounters.

After this month of imaginative exploration, the participant was invited to participate in a second one-on-one session with the researcher. During this session, the participant was asked to share his or her experiences with the imaginative practices. The researcher and participant discussed the following questions:

1. What has it been like over this past month to use your imagination in connecting with God?

2. When I say the word “God” now, what image pops in your head? How do you visualize God in your mind? What images of God, other than ones we explored, also appeal to you?

3. How has this process changed or not changed the way you visualize God?
4. How has this process informed or not informed your understanding of who God is?

5. How might you regularly incorporate imagination in the personal practice of your faith, or will you not? If not, why not?

This time of reflection was more open ended and less guided than the first session. Participants were encouraged to give their honest impressions of the process. They were also invited to share, at their discretion, any of their journaled notes concerning their experiences with the guided imaginative exercises.
CHAPTER 4

IMAGINING GOD

Participants in the study reflected on the use of their imagination throughout life, from imaginative play in early life to the more adult imaginative exercises of dreaming, planning, and even worrying. They explored their personal image of God, along with the significance of that image as they interpreted it. These images were dominated by nature themes and male anthropomorphic manifestations of God. Personal experience heavily influenced the way participants imaged God. Upon examining other metaphors for God, participants tended to have their personal images of God strengthened, while still gaining an appreciation for and understanding of the rich complexity of God’s character. Nature themes remained a strong point of connection for God, while female anthropomorphic manifestations of God provided new points of emphasis for many participants. Overall, participants’ awareness of God’s pervasive presence heightened.

The Playful Imagination

Play and imagination are powerfully linked. Participants discovered this truth when they were children, as they all recalled that their early imaginative experiences were centered around play. Whether it was pretending to battle cowboys and Indians, making mud pies, caring for baby dolls, or daydreaming about flying in the jungles of Borneo, imagination was associated with the wonder, excitement, and joy of play. As one participant noted, “When I was a child, I always imagined doing something [or]
being somebody else…like a baseball player…or something like that.”

Such play sometimes included imaginary clothing, interpersonal interactions with both real human beings and imaginary persons, and the changing of everyday objects into imaginative props (such as a stick becoming a cowboy’s gun). Sometimes these experiences were quite detailed, as with the young boy who daydreamed specifically of flying DC-3s. Drawing and dance were also used in imaginative play, connecting leisure with the arts. For others, building things alongside their parents allowed them to project their imaginations in order to see a future design. “I imagined what I wanted to build,” said one participant recounting his time in his father’s cabinet shop, “and [I] put it together.”

These imaginative acts of play were based upon the observed lived experiences of others. For instance, one participant imagined herself as a performer, dancing in front of a large audience. She had observed dancers as a child when her parents took her to see ballets. The boy who imagined himself flying admired the pilot of a crop duster who stayed with his family. His interest had expanded as he read the stories of missionary pilots in southeast Asia. The young girls who cared for baby dolls and made mud pies had observed the women in their lives attend to domestic duties. Those who played cowboys and Indians – both boys and girls – would reenact the scenes they saw on western television shows and John Wayne movies. Times of drawing would enable the child to design new expressions of elements observed in nature. For instance, one participant described drawing this way: “It might just be figures, it might be butterflies, it might be flowers or something like that…[but] in different colors, different ways of drawing those…[It was] related to seeing something, hearing something, doing
something and then…changing it in a different way.” Imagination gave a framework for creative expression and personal interpretation.

The participants recounted that, as they grew older, their imaginations turned to more practical matters. One man recalls the following: “I had a serious relationship with my first girlfriend…and I would imagine us getting married and setting up a little household and having children.” This same man remembered how his imagined wants and desires transformed as he grew older and had new responsibilities, from a go cart as a child to a tractor with a cab to keep the dust out once he started farming as a young man.

One woman, recalled the disruptive nature of higher education in relation to her imagination. Recalling her nursing school studies, she laments that “it almost took away creativity because you had to be so ‘one, two, three, four’ and ‘do it this way.” Another woman, still working in the community, discussed the transition in her life from playingimaginatively to imagining daily scenarios and the effects they would have on her job. “I imagine in my business…all the bad things,” she said. “I don’t know if it’s imagining or worrying.” The carefree imaginations of childhood had given way to the concerns of adulthood.

For the participants, even those who identified themselves as having a “vivid imagination,” there was a significant drop off in imaginative capacity and overall use of the imagination in their adult years. However, there was one area that inspired imagination in both childhood and adulthood: nature. One man simply confessed that “I really feel a connection with God when I’m looking at the sky.” He continued by noting
that “When I see a little bug, [and] he’s got five different colors on him, just as bright as
he can be, I think, ‘Gosh, what God’s imagination has to be!’”

Another participant described her enduring imaginative fascination with clouds.
“I would ride my bicycle way up in the field,” she noted, “and just sit there and stare at
the clouds. I remember one time there was one that looked exactly like an angel. Still to
this day when I see clouds, I think about this.” These experiences in nature took on a
dynamic character, as she also notes that “when [the clouds] would move…they would
morph from one thing to something else.” She would later note that this dynamic
character of nature mirrored her own dynamic relationship with God. “My relationship
with God,” she stated, “changes the way I see [Scripture]. Every day you’re a different
person.”

Other imaginative experiences remained into adulthood as well; they were just not
as pervasive as childhood experiences or the continuing imaginative influence of nature.
One participant described his ability to go to historical places and imagine the lives of
those who once occupied those areas. In describing one such experience at an old
abandoned fort, he states, “I’ve walked through it, I’m seeing the uniforms, I’m seeing
the weapons, I’m seeing where they ate, where they slept. You’ve already got…the
basics…and you can sit down in any place and just visualize what they were doing.” A
veteran, he also likes to visit places where old military aircraft are on display. Describing
one such situation, he says, “I sit there and listen to him idling, I can visualize sitting
in…the cockpit. I can even smell the smell that’s present in any old aircraft, especially
military aircraft.” For him, the imaginative experience that extends into adulthood is multi-sensory.

Another participant described such situational imagination when she is reading. “You’ve got to pretend you’re the character,” she said, “and get inside the book and walk around.” This is important to note, since our faith is highly textual and since imaginative prayer is grounded in Scripture. One manifestation of imaginative prayer is the Ignatian practice of placing oneself in a story from Scripture and interacting with the characters present, all while absorbing the sensual elements of the passage. She goes on to highlight that “when I come to a printed page, I’m bringing all my experiences to that page. And another person comes to that page and they’re bringing their experiences, which are very different from mine.” Just as when reading a non-scriptural text, different persons bring different experiences to the texts of Scripture. Imaginative exercises based in Scripture will not be uniform for all persons of faith, even when dealing with the same Scripture passage or metaphor.

The Personal God Image

Upon being asked to discuss their predominant image for God, participants highlighted three prevailing images: God as a bright light (sometimes shrouded, as with a cloud, and sometimes not), God as a man, and God as a comforting figure with specificity of action, but not specific physical traits. Most of these were comforting images for the participants. However, some perceived the light, especially the shrouded light, as a symbol of God’s distance or ultimate inaccessibility. God could be encountered, but never fully grasped. Furthermore, some who saw God anthropomorphically noted that
God’s facial expressions changed depending on their actions. When God was pleased with their actions, they reported a positive countenance; when God was unhappy with their actions, the divine countenance turned stern and disapproving.

These images could combine, as well, as one man detailed in his visual concept of God. When he imagined God, he saw “a white light…brighter than the sun.” When asked if he saw anything else, he replied that there “might be the outline of a person…[with] long hair, tall, [and] skinny.” While he admitted that his understanding of God as light was influenced by biblical sources, such as Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, the human form had more humble origins. That part of his divine image was influenced by the “person that all these pictures depict Jesus to look like.”

This was evident in many descriptions of the anthropomorphic God – often depicted in their minds as having long hair (gray or brown), a robe, and male features. Some participants distinguished between God the Father and Jesus Christ, with God the Father displaying the older physical features. This image was more based on popular art or personal sketches, perhaps of influential people they had known in their impressionable years of development. One man, a grandfather himself, described God as “grandpa…intensified.” Expounding upon this, he said that God is “all of the things you ever want to imagine about your grandfather…He cannot do any wrong, and he doesn’t give any misguided information.” This old, wise, sage divine prototype was present in the God-image of several participants. One woman questioned her own association with this particular manifestation of the collective societal God-image by proclaiming, “Are
you using your imagination? Or are you kind of remembering what you might have seen on TV when you were younger?”

One man described his image of God as “a cloud [with] a face in it.” He rejected, however, the stereotypical images of Jesus that we see reflected in popular culture and art. “My God doesn’t have long hair,” he declared. He continued by describing God as “round faced and his eyes are always open…[with] a stern look…[and he’s] clean shaven.” This man made a strong connection between observing nature and seeing God. God was revealed to him in the presence of natural resources, the awesome character of natural disasters, and the process of raising a plant from seed to fruition. When one observes these natural phenomena, “you’ve got to know there’s a God.

Another participant identified her image of God as resembling “a glow,” but also recognized the anthropomorphic influences of an experience she had as a child, which she identified as a vision of Jesus. Sick and quarantined in a hospital room, she remembered seeing “a man, young with a robe…seated there and just talking to me…saying, ‘It’s okay. It’s going to be all right. You’re not by yourself.’” The face in her divine image, though, is slightly obscured by the brightness of the light. There is the presence of “a softness” and “an aura” in this image that produces “a safe feeling.” She was “bothered,” however, when she was unable to recall this safe, comforting image when struggling to breathe during a choking emergency in the recent past. Still, she admits that “there are times when that same vision…or that same appearance is there and I can bring that up…and talk to that same vision or that same person.”
Several participants imagined God through interactions. One woman described such a situation: “When I’m praying, I actually feel like I’m sitting there talking to Jesus, that he’s in the chair, or next to me, and we’re just kind of carrying on a conversation.” One man described God’s reactions to him as he goes about the day by stating that, “I actually feel that God is there. I see God, and most of the time he’s laughing at me because I tried to tell him how to run things.” Others could “see” God through their experiences with surviving cancer, divorce, or tragic accidents. In all of these experiences the character of God foundationally informed how they understood God.

Another woman noted the power of diverse interactions with God through her imagination. She described the closeness of her interactions with God through this imaginative scene: “I pretend that God’s sitting in a big chair…and I go over and I become a little girl. I climb up in his lap and he puts his arms around me.” This same woman had imaginatively experienced Jesus walking hand in hand with her through the house when she was a child. “It was his hand,” she said, “that I saw more than anything else.” She continued by noting that “[Jesus] was having fun” in this experience. Finally, she also imagined herself in the place of biblical characters when interacting with God. In reading the Psalms, she observes that “I would be David and I would be lying on the ground, weeping and begging God to help.” She went on to note that “becoming that character helped me internalize” Scripture.

Nature continued to be a point of access for God. Nature in and of itself is not viewed as God, but as something that points the person of faith to God. One participant noted a particular experience when she stood on the top of a mountain. “I imagine,” she
said, “when God made all that and his glory. It blows me away. I about can’t stand up.

She maintained the separation between God and the evidence of God by noting the following: “You don’t worship the creation, but you certainly can be appreciative of it and the Creator’s beauty in it.” For another participant, he saw God when he was “looking at the creation.” When in the outdoors he admitted that “I see God everywhere I look. When I see something like [the beauty of creation], I get close to God.”

The Character of God

From this point, the conversations turned to describing God’s character. In discussing their impressions of God’s three most important character traits, participants mentioned ten traits only once. That is, these ten were mentioned by only one person, though they find connection to other traits mentioned. These traits were: understanding, perfection, justice, authority (being “in charge”), honesty, closeness (God “holding us”), gracious, free, forgiving, and disciplined. Five other traits were mentioned by multiple participants: caring, (two participants), compassionate (two participants), good (two participants), merciful (three participants), and loving (five participants).

Though most of these characteristics could be viewed as wholly or partially positive, some participants, as mentioned above, highlighted the severity and seriousness of God when discussing both God’s image and God’s character. One man struggled with the serious nature of God’s judgment while simultaneously declaring God to be “all good and all loving.” He explains that “God cannot sin. When he disciplines people or when he destroys things on this earth, and he does – he did it with the flood [and] he did it with Sodom and Gomorrah – it’s not God doing anything wrong.”
Another participant noted that although God “expresses pleasure” at his actions and that he “can see happiness” in God, God also sometimes responds to him in harsh disapproval. “I can visualize God just holding his head down,” he noted. He continues by stating that in these times, “I can see sadness and I can see disgust” in God. Interestingly, he later pointed to his mother as having similar reactions to him as a child. Referring to his mom, he said, “she didn’t have to tell me anything when she disapproved of what I was doing.” This information was communicated to him through “the look I got.” He would go on to confess the following: “that is the same feeling that I get from God.” His relationship with his wife would later take on this approval/disapproval dynamic. “If [my wife] cries,” he explained, “I’m just completely shut out…That’s the way I feel with Jesus. If I’ve done something that he totally disapproves of, then he’s got tears. I see those tears and I feel hurt.” This is but one example of how our human relationships establish a framework for our relationship with God.

One participant noted that she had struggled with a negative image of God, but had been able to discard earlier impressions of the divine for a more positive image. “When I grew up,” she began, “when you went to church or in my family it was like, ‘Don’t do that or God’s going to get you for that.’ So there was a fear there.” In her adult life this view of God had softened. “Now,” she continued, “I’ve learned that God is more loving and caring.” She still identified disciplined as one of the major characteristics of God’s nature. However, she described disciplined in terms of boundaries, visualizing this with a ruler or measuring stick – a biblical image employed in the book of Proverbs. As she finishes describing this transformation, she slips back
some into the old view of God, comparing God to her grandmother spanking her with a switch. The ruler that sets boundaries can also become the rod of punishment.

When asked to mentally picture these traits of God, participants imagined them almost exclusively being played out within interpersonal relationships. These varied from generic interactions to specific scenes from Scripture. Only once did a participant imagine a characteristic of God’s nature through picturing a specific, extra-scriptural person; one woman pictured compassion in the form of Mother Theresa. Also, there were two instances in which participants pictured God’s character without referring to a living being – be it divine, human, or animal. Both times participants employed nature imagery. One man pictured honesty through imagining an untouched, unspoiled landscape from God’s creation, while another man visualized Yellowstone National Park as a representation of freedom.

Of the generic human interactions used to visualize God’s character traits, the majority were familial, with most of those being depicted within the framework of the parent-child relationship. Forgiveness was imagined as a father and a son hugging, with mercy and understanding both visualized as a father laying a patient hand upon the shoulder of his distressed son. Love was represented as a family gathered around a dining room table enjoying a meal together. This same trait called to mind for one woman the image of a mother deer helping her fawns cross a busy road. Still another portrayed loving as the initial interactions between a newborn and her parents, while

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80 One interesting non-familial scene was one man’s concept of goodness as world peace brought about by the God-empowered elimination of hunger. This could, however, be understood as taking place within the setting of the general human family.
another saw this as an image of goodness and compassion. Some participants noted that these family images derived from their personal family experiences. The attraction to these images underscores the truth that family images are strongly connected to God.

The same can be said of our primary source for theological information: Scripture. Participants found stories that connected to God’s character in both the Old Testament and New Testament. God’s initial work of creating humanity and walking beside Adam and Eve in the garden was how one participant pictured goodness. The story of Noah’s salvation and preservation during the flood demonstrated God’s compassion for one man. One participant viewed the gentle shepherd of the twenty-third psalm as an image of God’s care for us. Another considered Jesus’s act of accepting the will of God in the garden of Gethsemane as an example of love, mercy, and justice. The subsequent act of Jesus’s crucifixion was evidence of God’s grace for one participant.

Photographs of God

As the participants began to examine the photographs representing the metaphors for God, all but one of them chose at least one dominant metaphor. That is, of the five pictures that they chose, six of the seven participants chose at least two pictures that represented a single metaphor. Five of those six chose five photographs representing four metaphors total (two pictures representing a single metaphor and three photographs each representing three different single metaphors). For example, one participant chose two photographs representing God as Gardener, one photograph representing God as Fire, one photograph representing God as Bird, and one photograph representing God as Monarch. From these choices we identified his dominant metaphor as God as Gardener. By
dominant metaphor, it is simply meant that this metaphor was chosen by that person with more frequency than the other metaphors.

One of the six participants who chose at least two pictures representing a single metaphor picked five photographs representing three metaphors total (two pictures representing a single metaphor, two more pictures representing a different single metaphor, and one photograph representing a different single metaphor). Specifically, he chose two photographs representing God as Mother, two photographs representing God as Gardener, and one photograph representing God as Bird. From here we worked together to identify which metaphor he would identify as dominant. God as Mother was the metaphor chosen. He admitted, “my inclination is to pick the babies with their mamas.” Also, the photograph representing God as Bird was the photograph of the ducks, which appear to be a parent duck nestling with its ducklings. This nurturing image reflected the nurturing represented in the mother images. This image was meant to connect with the scriptural image of Jesus mourning over Jerusalem and expressing his desire to gather them in like a mother hen gathers in her chicks. However, there is no way to distinguish in the picture if this is a mother duck or father duck; in the photographs representing God as Mother, all images are human images and clearly represent female nurturers. Ultimately, with his stated preference for mothering images and with the theme of nurturing young being represented in three of the five photographs chosen, God as Mother was identified as the dominant metaphor to work with during the guided imaginative reflection.
One participant did not identify a dominant metaphor in her picks. She chose five photographs that represented five different metaphors. She was given the option to choose one metaphor, from the five she initially chose, to work with further in the guided imaginative reflection. She was asked to pick from only those five metaphors, and not offered the opportunity to pick a metaphor outside of her initial choices. The five metaphors she had initially chosen were God as Fire, God as Mother, God as Banquet Host, God as Gardener, and God as Rock. She chose to work with God as Rock during our guided imaginative reflection. Ultimately, this fit with the overall dominance of nature metaphors that she chose in her initial photographs, (rock, fire, and gardener).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METAPHOR</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God as Mother</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Bird</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Gardener</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Rock</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Fire</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Banquet Host</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Monarch</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Spouse</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God as Shepherd</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>God as Warrior</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The overall frequency of the metaphors selected are represented in the table above. God as Mother was the most frequently chosen metaphor, being chosen 23% of the time. Five of the seven participants chose at least one photograph representing God as Mother. All three of the female participants chose at least one of these photographs.
Half of the male participants chose at least one of these representations as well.

Participants also chose a nature-themed image 63% of the time (God as Bird, God as Gardener, God as Rock, and God as Fire). This means that participants chose images and metaphors not directly related to parental nurture or nature 14% of the time (5 out of 35 image choices); no one chose such an image as their dominant metaphor. Furthermore, no one chose an image representing God as Warrior or God as Shepherd.

The overall frequency of individual photographs selected are represented in the table below. Although God as Rock was the third most frequently chosen metaphor by participants, over half of the participants chose a particular photograph representing that metaphor. With 57% of participants choosing this image, “Person Standing on a Large Rock” was the most frequently selected individual photograph of all forty images used in this study. Twenty-three photographs were not selected at all during this stage of the study. God as Mother is the only metaphor in which all four corresponding images were selected at least once in this stage of the study; three of the four respective images representing God as Bird and God as Gardener were chosen at least once in this stage of the study.
Table 2. Photograph Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHOTOGRAPH</th>
<th>METAPHOR</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person Standing on Large Rock</td>
<td>God as Rock</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread and Wine</td>
<td>God as Banquet Host</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dove</td>
<td>God as Bird</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle</td>
<td>God as Bird</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonfire</td>
<td>God as Fire</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Holding Baby</td>
<td>God as Mother</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Washing Child</td>
<td>God as Mother</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardening Tools</td>
<td>God as Gardener</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Plant in Hands</td>
<td>God as Gardener</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>God as Gardener</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ducks – Parent and Ducklings</td>
<td>God as Bird</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal in Furnace</td>
<td>God as Fire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crown</td>
<td>God as Monarch</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Nursing Baby</td>
<td>God as Mother</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant Mother</td>
<td>God as Mother</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desert Rock Formation</td>
<td>God as Rock</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple Holding Hands</td>
<td>God as Spouse</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL OTHERS</td>
<td>VARIOUS</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their discussions of why they chose particular images and metaphors, participants identified different factors that influenced their decisions. One man was heavily influenced by Scripture. His choice of the “Crown” photograph was influenced by Jesus’s identification as the Prince of Peace. He chose the image of “Wheat” because of the time “when Jesus walked with the disciples…on the Sabbath, and he stopped and picked some wheat.” The “Dove” image reminded him of the Holy Spirit within the context of Jesus’s baptism and the “Bonfire” image connected with the story in Exodus of the burning bush. Another participant connected the dove imagery with Scripture as well. Others connected the “Bread and Wine” image with the sacrament of Holy Communion and its scriptural roots. One woman connected “Person Standing on a Large
Rock” to the classic hymn “Rock of Ages.” She also saw a reflection of Isaiah 49:6, in which God states, “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands,” in the photograph, “Small Plant in Hands.” For her, “Mother Washing Child” was reminiscent of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

Life experience and relationships, though, were given most frequently as the reasons that participants gave for choosing particular images and metaphors. God is accessed, for them, through their relational interactions with God and the divine characteristics that connect to their lived realities. This remained the same after participants had an opportunity to engage in the guided imaginative exercise centered around their dominant metaphor. Though they were all engaging with a metaphor they had previously connected with God, they were engaging with at least two photographs at this stage of the study that they had not previously connected with God.

For instance, one man who had identified God as Gardener as his dominant metaphor was able to speak more deeply about his reasons why he chose this particular metaphor after engaging in the guided imaginative exercise. Having previously discussed his connection to this metaphor in scriptural terms before the exercise, he shifted to explaining his connection to the metaphor in personal terms after the exercise. “As a farmer,” he stated, “all I’ve done most of my life is fight weeds.” He continued, “If you don’t take out the weeds, you can’t produce a quality crop.” He then went on to explain how this connects with God’s work of spiritually purifying us. While he was not changing metaphors, his mapping – or metaphorical language – was broadening. “I see God in everything created,” he affirmed after the guided imaginative exercise. While he
had likely experienced God very deeply in his many years of faith, he grew more comfortable speaking of God in those terms *when it came to discussing who God is*. God was not only the God of Scripture, but the God of personal experience as well.

Other participants mapped their metaphorical understanding and connection through various life experiences. One man connected the “Bonfire” image and several of the rock images with his experiences in the American west, doing missionary work on the Navajo reservation. Another participant used a profound and recent mountain getaway to connect with the imagery of God as Rock. When looking at “Person Standing on a Large Rock,” she proclaimed, “That was me…breathing in the essence of God.”

One woman, in connecting the “Eagle” image to God, remembered regularly watching eagles in the skies over Alaska when she lived there. For her, this bird represented God’s “strength” and the “majestic” and “regal” nature of God. After engaging the God as Bird metaphor more deeply during the guided imaginative reflection, she was able to personally connect with the eagle imagery by imagining herself riding upon the divine bird. She described this experience as “liberating, fun, and secure,” all characteristics she was then able to connect to the nature of God. These characteristics were different from the characteristics of God she had noted earlier, thereby broadening her view of God’s nature and her ability to express that nature. The bird imagery also reminded her of her need for God. She noted that “we’re always pleading to [God], ‘Lord, I need, I need, I need.’” Her recognition of this reality was inspired by the photograph, “Feeding Baby Birds.” She was able to recognize in these images and in the accompanying guided imaginative exercise, that there were times in her
spiritual life in which she needed to be in the nest and times when she needed to get on the back of the eagle. There were times to sit and receive from God and times to actively work with and for God. She concluded this by observing that “I had never seen God as a bird until today…It’s funny how you always have this one picture of [God] in your mind, and now…it’s like a light bulb went off or something.”

Many connected the mother imagery with God’s personal care for them. One woman connected this imagery with the way “God loves and cares for us just like a mama loving her newborn baby.” One man admitted that the four images associated with the God as Mother metaphor represented “what I want my world to be.” Another man saw “God embracing us [as] his children” in the “Mother Holding Baby” image. When viewing the image “Pregnant Mother,” this same man saw God’s offer of “a new beginning.” After the guided imaginative reflection, he was able to express this more personally and precisely, as he confessed the following: “all God really wants from us is a relationship with us.” For a man who began our session by saying that he had “a small brain to pick,” this is a mightily profound insight. Participants regularly demonstrated that they had deeper knowledge of God than they gave themselves credit for or realized.

In describing the photograph “Mother Washing Child,” one woman noted that the mother represented “a parent dealing unselfishly, doing everything they can for a child, which is what God [does].” One man saw this picture and connected it with “how I see God protecting his people.” This image, along with the “Wheat,” “Ducks – parent with Ducklings,” and “Mother Holding Baby,” were all indicative of the overall theme of fruitfulness with which he associated God. Another woman noted in connection to the
“Mother Washing Child” image that the mother was “using the water…to really cleanse [the child] and that’s what water…does…in the spirit.” After engaging in the guided imaginative exercise, she expounded on the significance of the mother imagery by stating the following: “I see God as life – giving life and being life for all.” God, for her, was the one who gives life and then purifies us in order to sustain a fruitful, faithful life.

Extended Imaginings

Each participant engaged in at least five guided imaginative exercises in between the first and second one-on-one session, as directed. Some engaged in more than five and some engaged in all ten available guided imaginative exercises. Participants universally spoke of these experiences as positive. Some participants used the provided journals to jot down their reflections and most who did so were open to sharing these reflections. Most also took the time to read through the metaphor chart provided and to look up the scriptural references for each metaphor. They continued to express connections to God through themes of scriptural allusions, personal experience, and nature. Once their exposure to different images of God was broadened, most participants were able to connect with the scriptural metaphors on all three of those thematic levels. “Each of the [metaphors]…had something I could relate to,” said one man.

For instance, one man connected God as Warrior with his time in the Navy (personal experience), our dependence on God as Rock with a turtle carrying his shell around with him (nature), and the particular photograph, “Shepherd in Sheep’s Clothes,” with the incarnation of Christ (scriptural allusion). Another man could identify with the warrior “God [who] fights my battles and stands before me in times of danger.” This
connected with his personal experience; during “three years in Vietnam,” he explained, “I
saw that.” God as mother was especially poignant for one man, who shared that “my
own mother had the ability to make all my cares and problems go away.” Having lost his
mother to death some years back, and feeling that absence deeply, he added that now
“that’s what God can do for me.” One woman favored a particular metaphor based on
her personal interests. She explains that “the one that I think I go the most out of was the
gardener, because I love plants.” The God of all creation could identify with one of her
personal hobbies. She also identified particularly with God as Rock, due to both her
personal affinity for yard stones and her “love [of] the story of Elijah when he’s put in the
cleft of the rock.” As one person noted, “God speaks to everybody…depending on what
your experience is.”

For some participants, personal experience was a block, rather than a connection
point, to a certain metaphor. In describing past negative experiences with fire as a child
and adult, one man confessed that “the two ways I fear dying are drowning and burning.”
Because of that, in reference to the pictures representing God as Fire, he admitted “I
wouldn’t pick these pictures.” He also resisted the images depicting God as Warrior,
because “they were not kind pictures.” One woman described the process she had
undergone in which God as Spouse was formerly a negative image and was now a
positive image. After her first marriage, she admitted that she “probably would have
bristled” at the spouse imagery, “because I was a man hater.” Now, after a positive
second marriage, she sees things differently. Referring to the “Older Married Couple”
image, she said, “I thought that was just beautiful.” God had repaired a negative image
for her, in which “reframing led to…a broader glimpse of God.” Years after her difficult marriage, she can now see that “when my earthly husband was unfaithful, cruel, and selfish, God held my hand as my true husband.”

Another participant struggled with the imagery of God as Spouse, not because she has had a bad marriage experience, but because she feels as if she does not measure up to what a spouse should be. “Spouse was a real hard [metaphor] for me,” she said. Knowing both her and her husband pastorally and observing what has always appeared to be a strong, healthy marriage, I encouraged her to discuss her difficulty with this image more deeply. “I love my spouse,” she shared from her journal, “but I know that I can never love him as much as God loves him.” During this process, she never grew comfortable with that image for God, concluding that she “couldn’t pick a picture on that one” that she could connect with God. Sometimes it is not our experience with external blocks, but internal blocks, that prevent us from connecting to God in a particular manifestation of the divine character.

Some participants confirmed that this process helped them to see God differently. One man admitted that God “used to be that old man with a beard…and now, I see [God] in a lot of different things.” Expounding on this, he said “I see [God] in that eagle…flying above the earth and that warrior with all the pain on his face.” God “is who [God] wants to be,” he ultimately decided. Another participant affirmed that “there are so many attributes of God that are in each” metaphor. The study introduced participants to different facets of God’s character that they had overlooked in their
previous ponderings of God. God’s nature is greater, richer, and more deeply profound than any one person’s perspective can grasp.

Another woman echoed these insights, when she said, “I have imagined God in more ways than I ever have before.” “I always imagined God,” she continued, “as this little elderly man…but now I can imagine [God] differently.” One way in which she was able to picture God in a new way was as a sheepdog, as reflected in the “Sheepdog and Sheep” image. In the past, she had envisioned “Jesus as a shepherd, but never a sheepdog.” She admitted that her attraction to this image “surprised” her, but that now she “can imagine God…ready to protect us, ready to pounce, [and] very alert.” This new view of God, she continued, “gives me a feeling of safety and security.” The image made a lasting impression on her, as she confessed, in all seriousness, that “I might not ever pet a dog again without thinking of [God].”

She was also challenged by the use of mother imagery in describing God. Exploring that aspect of God’s identity “was difficult for me,” she admitted. “I just never imagined God as being a woman,” she explained. Her initial hesitancy with this image gradually subsided. “Even though it felt taboo,” she said, “after a while…it kind of just grew on me.” As she journaled, she noticed that “I kept writing ‘she’ all the time,” in reference to God. Her conclusion was that “there are more sides to God than…one side. The more you learn about [God], the more you grow.”

Some participants admitted that they still saw God in the same way as they had before the study began, but their awareness of God was heightened. One man admitted, “I primarily go back to the [original] image, but I can see [God] in other ways too now.”
When he sees one of the metaphor images, such as a nature image, it reminds him to connect with the God he has always visualized. In using a nature image not covered in our ten metaphors, the image of a tree, he explains it this way: “God is still the same image that I had when I was a boy…[but the tree] is just an indication that God exists. My God exists when I see that tree.” The image of God he had visualized for nearly seventy years of life was deeply rooted in him, and yet he could still recognize that the study “broadened my religious experience.” He also discovered how this process could help him connect to God more deeply in the routine contexts of life. “If I’m on my tractor by myself,” he said, “…[I] can get in that imaginary state…[and] transfer myself into that imaginary world.” God might be the same as he has always known God, but God has become more accessible to him. As one woman put it, “I don’t know if [the process] changed [my image of God] as much as it has given it more depth.”

Another man stated that he still visualized God most meaningfully in the same way he had throughout his life. He confessed that the process had not “changed my perception of [God], but I’m…seeing God in more places.” He highlighted how this process made the unfathomable greatness of God more relatable. He states, “Where the vastness of God the creator is beyond my imagination, I can see God…[in] what [God] created.” That which he admitted had been “just too big for me” was brought nearer to him. Now that he was “trying to be more aware,” he expressed a commitment “to look for God in everything, every day.” The process had given him an appreciation for the sanctified imagination. “Our imagination,” he said, “makes us search for God [and] stay close to God.” Scripture gives us these metaphors to connect with God, because even
though God is different from us in so many ways, in some ways God is like us. The
deeper reality might be that we are like God in so many ways. Metaphor touches that
place where the image of God resides within us.

Others attested to this benefit of being able to access God more easily after
engaging in this process. After finishing the process, one woman stated that she felt
empowered to “look for signs…[and] listen for God.” This was important to her, because
she recognized that “it’s difficult to truly communicate if you can look at…God.” Her
spiritual eyes had been opened to God’s presence and reality, which resulted in more
freely flowing communication with God. Another woman affirmed that it was
“refreshing to see God in a different light, instead of just one aspect.” Having more ways
to imagine God allows for more points of connection with God, eliminating the
exclusivity of images personally associated with pain and negative past experiences.
“We all see God differently,” she concluded. God honors all of those different
perspectives with a great diversity of accessibility and availability. As one participant
emphasized, “metaphors teach us a semblance of God, but it’s not all of [God].” “God
made different languages,” affirmed another, “…[so] I’m sure [God] makes different
thought processes.” This important truth has not always been honored in the Church.

Many participants responded positively to the intentional act of taking time to
complete the guided imaginative exercises. “It gave me an opportunity to just sit and
think,” said one man. This was important to him, because that intentionality “kind of
opened my eyes some to who God really is and I think I know [God] a little bit better
now.” Another man admitted that this kind of intentional reflection “is not always
something that comes really naturally or really easily” to him. The imaginative process “gave me a better system” for reflection and “a good way to learn how to concentrate on God,” he concluded. One woman commented that “sitting quietly and thinking about the pictures in relationship to my relationship with Christ really helped me focus.” “This is the first one-on-one session I’ve ever had with a minister,” one man said appreciatively. “Without you,” he concluded, “I would’ve never done this on my own.”

The desire to continue with the imaginative process outside of the bounds of this project was expressed by many participants. One man admitted that “I could do it on my own, but…I need prompting.” One man felt that he could replicate the imaginative process without materials, by looking around him while sitting beside an open window or in traffic. By picking any image that he happened to see, he could ask the question, “How does that object relate to God?” Another participant admitted that the process had “drawn me closer to God,” and had been “alive” and “joyful” for her. She envisioned herself using her imagination more in her work with elementary school students. The process had encouraged her to “see Jesus in” her students. Another woman planned on using aspects of this process with her women’s Bible study and two male participants planned to share the images and guided imaginative reflections with their adolescent grandchildren.

Finally, some participants had suggestions for improving the study, whether it was adding new elements or additional metaphors. The addition of music and kinesthetic elements was suggested by one woman. “You’d have sight and hearing going into the imagination,” she noted. She recommended offering participants the opportunity to hold
and touch an actual rock, a stuffed bird, or a flower in soil when working with those respective metaphors. “From a teacher’s perspective,” she noted, “there are so many people who learn different ways.” Others suggested exploring different biblical and extrabiblical metaphors and using them as access points of God. Some of these other metaphors included the sun, water, salt, new birth, clouds, and (in true south Georgia fashion) the pecan tree. This final image was noted by one man because of its ability to provide food for so many creatures in our area, thereby connecting to God’s faithfulness in providing for humans and animals alike.
CHAPTER FIVE

NEW IMAGES AND IMAGININGS

Imaginative prayer is an accessible practice for laity and clergy alike that fosters an environment of communion with God. Those who are unfamiliar with the practice simply need someone familiar with the practice to lead them in discovering and utilizing this important activity. This can come in the form of a guided one-on-one session with an equipped clergy or lay leader, a workshop, or a curriculum for Sunday school classes or small groups. Within these learning and equipping opportunities, participants must first become familiar with both their naturally ingrained images of God and alternative images of God. Those who lead such opportunities will be best served by introducing participants to the breadth and variety of divine images readily available within the faith tradition and holy texts. Participants may connect most meaningfully to images of God that reflect the natural world and the nurturing character of God. Aptitude and comfort in the practice of imaginative prayer should develop gradually and remain centered within the context of imaginative personal experience before moving to more advanced imaginative practice, such as those reflected in Ignatius’s *Exercises*.

Opening Our Imaginative Eyes

Pastors and religious leaders have a responsibility to teach their parishioners how to engage with the spiritual disciplines within the contexts of their daily lives. Awareness of God is fostered by intentional spiritual practice. Just as the participants in this study
saw an increase in their awareness of God’s presence, engagement with other prayer, meditation, and other general spiritual practices will increase the ability to access God in the mundane elements of life. Specifically, prayer must be taught and practiced communally in more ways than just the traditional format of asking, receiving, and expressing thanksgiving to God. Though this is an important facet of prayer, it is not the only mode of prayer helpful to people of faith.

Many parishioners will not try these practices on their own, either because of a lack of knowledge concerning these practices or a feeling of inadequacy. This was evidenced by participants in this study who expressed the novelty of such pastor-parishioner interactions and the difficulty of self-initiating imaginative spiritual exercises. Clergy have a responsibility to assist parishioners in opening their spiritually imaginative eyes and deepening their spiritual capacities. As Richard Foster has noted, “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.” Intentionally action on the part of Christian clergy is necessary for a deepening of spiritual experience across the board in the Church.

Clergy can accomplish this in many ways. Preaching can become a context for imaginative stimulation, through the use of descriptive language, metaphor, and story. The altar table and surrounding chancel furniture can be decorated to reflect and enhance the theme of that week’s Scripture. The pastoral prayer time can be converted one week into a time of guided meditation. Screens in the sanctuary would also allow for elements of this study to be replicated in the worship service – particularly the elements involving the photographic images and audio employed in the guided imaginative practices. After

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81 Foster, Celebration, 1.
the completion of this project, I preached a ten-week sermon series on the metaphorical images of God explored in this study at the Byromville-Drayton charge. That way, those who were unsure of or uncomfortable participating in the study could benefit from seeing God in different ways.

Ultimately, clergy must give parishioners time and attention, expressing to them the importance of their spiritual life – not only to their own life, but to the communal life of the local church. A clergy person expressing to a parishioner that “Your spiritual life is valid and important to me” can be life changing for someone who has never had that expressed to her before. Many of the elements of this study and other related spiritual practices can be adapted for use in spiritual direction. Clergy persons would benefit greatly, personally and professionally, from engaging in continuing education opportunities that equip them to practice a ministry of presence, such as spiritual direction. If parishioners are going to engage in practices that foster deep communion with God, they need to foster deep communion with those who are viewed as “religious professionals.” As one of my college professors was fond of saying, such spiritual depth and insight is often “caught rather than taught.”

Seeing God

Once the context is provided, clergy and religious leaders will be wise to offer a plethora of images to which people of faith can connect personally. As this study has evidenced, the Christian holy texts and traditions provide a great deal of material with which to work. In addition to the ten metaphors employed in this study, metaphors for God as light, lamb, cloud, water, friend, potter, judge, shield, tower, counselor, and more, are deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition. Present life experience also affords us with
many 21st century parallels, many of which might be novel and challenging to our static cultural understandings of God. Could God be imagined as a wireless internet connection? Or an uber driver? What about God as barista or CEO? These might not be scriptural metaphors, but could they communicate something about God’s character to a 21st century American audience? The possibilities are only limited by our imaginations.

The challenge for anyone proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ or those responsible for the spiritual growth of a community of faith is to contextualize the truth of God in order to connect people to God. In a tradition in which we sing the hymn, “Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise,” we are charged with making God visible by helping people see God, often in new ways.

Sometimes that will mean challenging persons of faith to consider images they are not comfortable with initially. In this study, it was observed that some participants struggled with, and even avoided, certain images that connected to bad childhood memories or negative life experiences. However, it was also observed that such negative associations could be overcome with time and intention. God might provide spiritual maturation and healing through reimaging the negative referent through the lens of God. For example, for those who struggle with fatherly imagery for God, there is often a negative experience with their father at the root of this struggle. Could there be spiritual power, though, in both confessing the inadequacy of one’s earthly father as a model and redefining fatherhood in general through the glimpses of God’s character discovered in exploring other metaphorical images of God? Would the person of faith then be equipped to work with that previously negative image of God and to reframe her conception of father? This would be an interesting topic for further study. Like the
woman who viewed God as the spouse she needed within the framework of her marriage to a man who treated her poorly, such reframes are possible. The key, however, is in exposing persons of faith to alternate images of God so that trust in God can be cultivated.

Metaphors that employ imagery of nature or nurture – or ones that employ a combination of the two – may have the greatest ability to connect us with God. Participants in this study identified most significantly with these images. Shepherd is a metaphor that incorporates both of these elements and it has been a powerful metaphor for God throughout the ages in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Such imagery has even been incorporated into our Christian lexicon, as pastor is the Latin word for shepherd. This was, however, not an image that connected strongly with the participants of this study, at least in the initial stages of the study. There are two likely explanations for this. Firstly, perhaps shepherd has been diluted of its power by overuse. Secondly, perhaps shepherd does not connect to most persons in the urban and suburban contexts that dominate American society. If the metaphor of shepherd rang hollow in a rural setting, as with this study, it is unlikely to resound with the vast majority of persons living within urban and suburban settings.

What, then, are some options for a population largely isolated from nature, but for whom nature is still a powerful draw? As seen in some participants’ connection of the rock imagery to the American West, perhaps God can be imagined within the larger imaginative context of a vacation into nature, perhaps into the woods or in the setting of a national park. The vacation itself could parallel with the Christian journey in general, while the awe experienced within nature, say watching a waterfall or standing in the
shadow of a mountain, could parallel with God and being in the divine presence. Could such a framework be the setting for the *Pilgrim’s Progress* of 21st century America? This situation would lend itself to the practice of imaginative prayer, as the whole scene could be imagined as a dynamic, moving image – more akin to a video than a snapshot. The accompanying emotions and experiences of a vacation into nature could find parallel spiritual application. The planning of such a trip could connect with spiritual discipline; anxieties that accompany family vacations could parallel the fears and doubts accompanying the spiritual journey. The places one stops along the way could correlate with one’s own spiritual autobiography and reflect the movements of spiritual growth and struggle. God could be powerfully encountered in such a mentally visual exercise.

What about nurture, though? How could this be incorporated in meaningful ways to such an imaginative framework? These questions might be best answered by the persons one brings along on such a trip. How do they inform and shape the journey? How is God present in them? What dangers and pitfalls do they help you avoid? There is also the possibility for nurture imagery within the final act of reaching the destination of the trip. In addition to the awe of the experience referenced above, what is being nurtured in this natural context? Perhaps God is found in the fruitful tree of the forest or the rock that hides a green hillside nourished by a waterfall. What about the animals who thrive in such a landscape? Perhaps God is the salmon spawning against the current in a northwestern mountain river. In this metaphorical imagining of God, this convergence of natural and nurturing images it is not in which details are mentally visualized. The most important aspects are the quest itself out into nature and whomever one meets at the end
of that quest and along the way. The details are not as important as the avenues toward connection with God.

A Dual Image for Today

What about those church contexts in which such poetic and esoteric wonderings would not take root? After all, the journey toward such vibrant spiritual imaginings is a slow and steady journey. While I affirm McFague’s affinity for friend imagery, there is perhaps a more prevalent and less utilized metaphor that exists already within the Judeo-Christian tradition and which might act as a bridge between tradition and more elaborate spiritual imaginings. It is also an image that is firmly rooted in nature and nurture. That image is God as mother. This image was the most powerfully communicative of all images in this study, sometimes to the surprise of the participants. God as mother has been challenged by the prevailing sexism of Western culture throughout the centuries. The present atmosphere of women’s power, bolstered by the #metoo movement and “equal pay for equal work” campaigns in recent years, makes this an appropriate time to advocate for greater use of feminine imagery for God. This is by no means a novel idea, as feminists like McFague have been advocating for such a spiritual realignment for well over half a century, but the culture in general is especially inclined toward such a religious-linguistic harvest. The time is apt for emphasizing the femininity of God.

I write this, however, with a caveat. It would be counterproductive for the religious pendulum to swing too sharply in the opposite direction and insist on the prohibition of using male language for God. This language is still appropriate and meaningful for many people of faith today. Neither is this a plea for the Church to replace Father and Mother with genderless or generic metaphors for God, such as Parent.
What I am advocating for is the generous use of both God as Father and God as Mother to alternatively refer to God. This is a dual image, a reimagining without reactivity against one or the other gendered metaphor. Even within the same worship service, for instance, God could be referred to as our Father and our Mother as easily as we could use one to the exclusion of the other – as often happens with our use of Father. In imaginative exercises, the person of faith could envision God as two parents holding a newborn baby, imagining that the baby is her and that God is encapsulated in both parental figures. The presence of two distinct figures for God within the imaginative exercise is not outside the realm of Christian experience, as we have developed intricate Trinitarian theologies over the past two millennia. In fact, several participants in this study expressed the frequency in which they imagined God and Jesus as two distinct individuals during prayer.

This hearkens back to the very core of our nature as human beings, as expressed scripturally in Genesis 1:27, in which we read that “God created humankind in [God’s] image, in the image of God, [God] created them; male and female [God] created them.” There is a deep, foundational connection between God’s image and the human experience of maleness and femaleness. God is neither male nor female, but something about both reflect God. Why, then, should the Church, or people of faith in general, be hesitant to use both of these images to connect with God, or to use one at the exclusion of the other? In our maleness and femaleness, God has placed a connection point to humanity, and this is expressed deeply in the realities of both fatherhood and motherhood.

God as Mother and God as Father should not be considered terminal images of God, as this study has shown that God’s being reaches beyond our human capacities of
understanding and speech. Diversity in our conceptions of God will continue to fuel deeper connections to God. The dual image of Father and Mother, though, appeal to both our human nature and the experience of receiving and giving nurture. They can act, together as co-equals, as foundational images of God, from which further conceptions of God can be imagined. To do so, the Church, and people of faith in general, must honestly confront the prevalence and dangers of misogyny present in religious culture. Furthermore, clergy and laity must make peace with the discomfort that might initially accompany such a shift in religious understanding. An ethnographic exploration of the use of alternative male-female language for God within the contexts of worship and spiritual growth in a local church would be an intriguing opportunity for further study in this area.

In addition, the development of a curriculum to be used in personal study and formation, as well as in group spiritual or educational contexts, is needed. The same can be said for further discussions and academic studies centered on the use of imagination and metaphor in religious experience. The literature in this area is sparse and the need for more diligent study cannot be overstated. With the recent appeal of mindfulness practices in secular literature, serious interest in the exploration of the imagination might blossom. Such curriculum and literature could be used for intensive retreats to acclimate participants to the use of their religious imagination. Use of this study with children would be an intriguing prospect for further study. Most participants clearly identified their imaginative activities of childhood, describing them with great detail, even though all participants were decades removed from childhood. It would also be of interest to
explore what metaphors other cultures and religions use in connection with God and the concepts of the divine.

Expanding the Sanctified Imagination

What next steps can be taken by those who have participated in this study or others who have begun exploring their own personal connection to God through the use of imagination and metaphor? Once one has become accustomed to the setting of imaginary prayer, an imaginative framework for prayer can be constructed, such as the personal framework I referenced in the first chapter in which I meet the living Christ at the banks of a creek. Such a place should inspire comfort and peace as to encourage spiritual stimulation and communion with God. This is not to say that God cannot be encountered in chaos, but the purpose of such an exercise is to find a refuge in which communion with God is the prime focus and inhibitions to this purpose are kept at a minimum. Multiple sanctuaries of the imagination can be constructed and used to connect with God. These are deeply personal sanctuaries, much as our default or preferred images of God are.

Scriptural settings can be used for such imaginative sanctuaries. They can also provide challenging scenarios outside of the comfort and safety of our personal sanctuaries. Both the comfort and the challenge can provide opportunities for communion with God and spiritual growth. Entering into the stories of Scripture has long inspired people of faith to encounter God in new and fresh ways. Take for example the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman from John 4:7-15, which is a story from Scripture that invites both comfort and challenge. In this passage, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman as she goes about her daily duties of drawing water from a well. Jesus
asks her for a drink. She is surprised by his request and resists his request. In response, Jesus offers her living water. Confused by this offer, she challenges his ability to provide this water. After hearing his explanation of what he means by living water, the woman asks Jesus for this gift. Entering into Scripture imaginatively does not necessarily mean repeating the entire scene for yourself, replacing one of the characters in the narrative. This might be the case, but the imaginative experience can also take on a context-specific adaptation of the Scripture being read. The person of faith answers the question, “What would it look like to encounter God in a similar fashion?”

An imaginative exercise based on this passage might look like this:

Close your eyes and imagine yourself in the middle of your daily duties. Perhaps you are at work, fulfilling the requirements of the day. Or maybe you are at home busily tending to chores. You are alone and perhaps you are daydreaming or quietly humming a song. Suddenly, you look up and notice that God is standing close by. God asks for your help. How do you feel about this intrusion into your day? Are you receptive to God or do you feel too busy to bother with this divine distraction?

As you consider God’s request for help, you begin to question why God would ask you for help. You feel all of your self-doubt rise to the surface and you are painfully aware of your inadequacies. Why has God not asked someone else – someone more equipped – for help? What are those self-doubts that you harbor in your soul? In what ways have you felt inadequate?

You are tempted to go back to your daily duties, when God now offers something to you. God is offering you exactly what you long for that will satisfy your soul. You realize that what God is offering you makes the feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt
disappear. What is it that you need from God in this exact moment? What is God offering you that will fulfill your soul and give you confidence in who God has created you to be? What can God do for you that no one else can?

God describes for you specifically what this new gift of spiritual fulfillment will look like. In what ways is God inviting you into a new experience of the divine presence and power? What effects will this gift of God have on your day to day experience of life? As you consider these questions, you notice that God is waiting for your response. Will you receive the gifts God has prepared for you? Will you trust in God’s power and God’s resources? Know that you are in the presence of God – the one who created you, the one who knows you deeply, and the one who alone can satisfy your soul.

What a great metaphor for imaginative prayer in general! God breaks into the mundane experiences of life and communes with those who will open themselves up to the divine presence. The possibilities for new imaginative prayer experiences are as limitless as one’s creative mind. Picturing God through the powerful use of metaphor invites the person of faith into new encounters with God through story, prayer, and all facets of the human experience. It all begins with opening one’s mind to the incarnational, and sometimes surprising, presence of the God who is infinitely multidimensional.

Those who have participated in this study may not regularly incorporate imaginative prayer into their regular prayer repertoire right away. After many years of intentionally fostering a natural inclination toward this type of prayer, I still am learning how to strengthen and deepen this practice within myself. Likewise, when I do pray imaginatively, I find myself relying heavily on those early images of God established
within me from the paintings of Jesus I observed as a child. The practice, however, will broaden our capacity to encounter God in meaningful ways and attain a deeper understanding of God’s character. When we understand more about God and when we connect with God more intentionally, then we will know God more deeply and meaningfully. Life change comes from growing in relationship with God in such ways, as can be attested to in my own experience and the experience of those who participated in this study.

This is ultimately one of the primary roles of the pastor: to facilitate relational growth with God in the lives of persons of faith. Imaginative prayer and the exploration of biblical metaphors for God are but two facets of the lifelong journey of accomplishing this task. Other practices must be adopted and other depths of God’s character must be plumbed, allowing our connection to God to remain fresh and our communion with God to enliven us. Intentional spiritual growth as a whole must be fostered within the parish setting and persons of faith must be given the opportunity to share these moments of spiritual development with their pastors (for whom continued spiritual development is necessary as well). These experiences will begin and end in prayer and they will lead us closer to the God who desires above all to be known.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

METAPHOR TABLE

The following is a listing of the ten metaphors used in this study. The criteria for use in this study is: employed in both the Old and New Testaments, attested to by at least three biblical writers, and appears in more than one genre of biblical writing. The examples given are not exhaustive, but simply demonstrate the sufficiency of each metaphor used. For the purpose of manageability, this study is not inclusive of all biblical metaphors for God which meet the above stated criteria. The chart begins on the next page and was given to each participant after the first one-on-one session.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rock</td>
<td>- Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18 (Law)</td>
<td>- God is called “the Rock” and “the Rock of salvation”</td>
<td>- Matthew 7:24-25 and Luke 6:47-48 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- All who hear the word of Jesus and who act upon them build their “house” upon a solid rock foundation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- 2 Samuel 22:3 (History)</td>
<td>- God is the rock who provides refuge</td>
<td>- 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 (Epistle)</td>
<td>- Christ is the spiritual rock from which we drink</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Psalm 78:35 (Wisdom)</td>
<td>- God is the rock who redeems</td>
<td>- 1 Peter 2:4-8 (Epistle)</td>
<td>- Christ is the “living stone,” the cornerstone for those who trust and the stumbling block for those who do not believe</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Isaiah 17:10 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- God is the rock who provides salvation and refuge</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Habakkuk 1:12 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- The LORD is the rock of judgment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shepherd</td>
<td>- Genesis 48:15 (Law)</td>
<td>- God was Jacob’s shepherd</td>
<td>- John 10:11-18 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- Jesus as Good Shepherd</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Psalm 23 (Wisdom)</td>
<td>- “The LORD is my shepherd…”</td>
<td>- Hebrews 13:20 (Epistle)</td>
<td>- Jesus is “the great shepherd of the sheep”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Psalm 95:7 (Wisdom)</td>
<td>- The people of God are “the sheep of [God’s] hand”</td>
<td>- Revelation 7:17 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>- The Lamb (Jesus) is the shepherd of the people of God, leading them into everlasting life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Ezekiel 34:11-22 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- The Lord GOD is the shepherd who searches for the sheep that are</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Deuteronomy 32:11-12 (Law)</td>
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<td>- God cares for Israel as an eagle cares for its young</td>
<td>Matthew 6:26 (Gospel)</td>
<td>God feeds the birds (inspiring image of parental bird feeding the open mouths of recently hatched baby birds) and so God will feed us</td>
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<td>- Ruth 2:12 (History)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- The wings of the LORD are a refuge</td>
<td>Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- Jesus as mother hen gathering in chicks</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Psalm 91:4 (Wisdom)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- God covers us with wings and pinions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Deuteronomy 32:13 (Law)</td>
<td>God nurses the people of Israel</td>
<td>John 3:3-7 (Gospel)</td>
<td>New birth from God; born of the Spirit; born from above</td>
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<td>- Proverbs 8 (Wisdom)</td>
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<td>- Fear of the LORD gives healing to shor (navel/umbilical cord); umbilical connection to God</td>
<td>John 13:23 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- Resting upon Christ’s bosom (kolpos) reminiscent of mothering/nursing</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Isaiah 66:6-13 (Prophecy)</td>
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<td>- Though the Isaiah passage speaks of Zion and Jerusalem in terms of motherhood, God is also spoken of in these terms, esp. in vv. 9,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Exodus 3:2 (Law)</td>
<td>- God appears to Moses in the burning bush</td>
<td>Acts 2:3 (History)</td>
<td>- The coming of the Holy Spirit is evidenced with “tongues of fire” resting upon the followers of Jesus</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exodus 13:21 (Law)</td>
<td>- God leads the people of Israel in a pillar of fire</td>
<td>Hebrews 12:29 (Epistle)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lamentations 2:3 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- God burns like a consuming fire</td>
<td>- “God is a consuming fire”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Zechariah 13:8-9 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- The LORD is a refiner who wields fire to purify the people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Banquet Host</td>
<td>Psalm 23:5 (Wisdom)</td>
<td>- The writer says of the LORD that “you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”</td>
<td>Matthew 22:1-14, Luke 14:1-24 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- Kingdom of God is described in parables as banquet given by God</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Isaiah 25:6 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- The LORD sets a feast of food and wine for all people</td>
<td>Revelation 19:9 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>- God has prepared the marriage supper of the Lamb (Jesus) and the bride (the faithful Church)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Isaiah 54:1-8 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- The LORD is the husband of the desolate woman (Israel)</td>
<td>Mark 2:19-20 and Luke 5:34-35 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- Jesus as bridegroom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Isaiah 62:4-5 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>- God rejoices over Jerusalem as a bridegroom</td>
<td>2 Corinthians 11:2 (Epistle)</td>
<td>- Paul pledging the church of Corinth to Christ in marriage</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13; God is the agent/initiator of this mothering work</td>
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<td>Hosea 2:16-23 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>rejoices over a bride</td>
<td>Ephesians 5:25-32 (Epistle)</td>
<td>Church as bride of Christ</td>
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<tr>
<td>God as husband and Israel as wife</td>
<td>Revelation 19:7-8 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>Revelation 22:17 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>Marriage of the Lamb (Jesus) to the bride of the faithful Church</td>
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</table>

**Warrior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exodus 15:1-5 (Law)</th>
<th>“The LORD is a warrior”</th>
<th>Matthew 10:34-39 (Gospel)</th>
<th>Jesus came to bring a sword; following Christ is likened to following in battle as one is to be willing to give up their life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psalm 78:65 (Wisdom)</td>
<td>God, like a drunken warrior, defeats and shames “adversaries”</td>
<td>Ephesians 6:10-17 (Epistle)</td>
<td>God has given us armor to wear as a captain would give to a band of soldiers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isaiah 42:13 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>The LORD is a warrior who “stirs up…fury”</td>
<td>Revelation 1:16, 2:16 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>Jesus as the war-maker who comes with a sword in his mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zephaniah 3:17 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>The LORD is a victorious warrior who sings a song of triumph over the people</td>
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**Gardener**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genesis 2:4-19 (Law)</th>
<th>God plants the garden of creation</th>
<th>Matthew 9:37-38 (Gospel)</th>
<th>Jesus is Lord of the harvest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Samuel 7:10, 1 Chronicles 17:9 (History)</td>
<td>The LORD “plants” the people</td>
<td>John 15:1-7 (Gospel)</td>
<td>Jesus is the vine, we are the branches; The Father is the vine-grower and pruner of the vine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremiah 24:6 (Prophecy)</td>
<td>The LORD “plants” the people</td>
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<td>Monarch</td>
<td>- Numbers 23:19 (Law)</td>
<td>- Psalm 10:16 (Wisdom)</td>
<td>- 1 Samuel 8:4-7 (History)</td>
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<td>- God prepares a harvest of restored fortune for Judah</td>
<td>- The day of God’s judgment is likened to a harvest</td>
<td>- Balaam prophesies that the LORD is “acclaimed as a king among” the people of Israel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- The day of God’s judgment is likened to a harvest</td>
<td>- God feels rejection from the people when they choose an earthly king; rejection of God’s monarchy</td>
<td>- “The LORD is king forever and ever”</td>
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<td>- Matthew 5:34 (Gospel)</td>
<td>- Revelation 17:14 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>- Revelation 4:1-11 (Apocalypse)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Hebrews 2:9 (Epistle)</td>
<td>- Revelation 4:1-11 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>- Revelation 4:1-11 (Apocalypse)</td>
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<td>- Revelation 17:14 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>- Revelation 17:14 (Apocalypse)</td>
<td>- Revelation 17:14 (Apocalypse)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Jesus brings a harvest of righteousness</td>
<td>- The Lamb (Jesus) is King of kings</td>
<td>- The Lamb (Jesus) is King of kings</td>
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APPENDIX B

METAPHOR PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs are reproduced from the royalty-free, creative commons photo-sharing website, Pixabay (www.pixabay.com). Each image was reproduced as 5x7 photographs for use in the study. Images in this document are presented in color.

1. God as Rock

   “Heart Rock”

   “Cornerstone”
“Desert Rock Formation”

“Person Standing on Large Rock”

2. God as Shepherd

“Shepherd Statue”
“Shepherd in Sheep’s Clothing”

“Sheepdog”

“Shepherd Holding Sheep”

3. God as Bird

“Eagle”
“Feeding Birds”

“Dove”

“Ducks – Parent with Ducklings”

4. God as Mother
“Mother Holding Baby”

“Pregnant Mother”

“Mother Washing Child”

“Mother Nursing”
5. God as Fire

“Candles”

“Fireball”

“Metal in Furnace”

“Bonfire”
6. God as Banquet Host

“A Cup of Tea”

“Bread and Wine”

“Cornucopia”

“Banquet Table”
7. God as Spouse

“Kissing”

“Couple Holding Hands”

“Elderly Couple”

“Laughing Couple”
8. God as Warrior

“Swordsman on Horse”

“Coat of Arms”

“Guard”

“Painted Face”
9. God as Gardener

“Soil”

“Small Plant in Hands”

“Gardening Tools”

“Wheat”
10. God as Monarch

“Young King”

“Crown”

“King among Equals”

“Castle”
APPENDIX C

GUIDED IMAGINATIVE EXERCISES SCRIPTS

Script #1 – God as Rock

Narrator:

Images of God, session one, God as Rock. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Rock” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God the sturdy reminder of love standing firm in the desert? Is God the cornerstone that lifts up and supports the temple of your being? Perhaps God is the high and majestic mountain that rises over the horizon in awesome power. Maybe God is the firm foundation that cannot be moved by the raging elements.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – encountering an unmovable reminder of love within the wasteland; being constructed into a holy place as day by day a brick of your true self is placed upon the foundation of God’s character
and work; dwarfed by the wonder of the mountain as you stand in its long shadow, looking up so that you can barely see its apex; or standing in freedom and triumph upon the solid rock of God’s being and grace. Feel the smooth surface, weathered by the winds and rains so that only what is good and strong remains. Watch as you grow wider and taller upon the cornerstone of wisdom and mercy. Hear the echoes of one calling to you from the summit. Push down with your feet upon your foundation and notice how it refuses to give way.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is the rock, solid and sure, establishing you, mighty and majestic, and holding you up.

Script #2 – God as Shepherd

Narrator:

Images of God, session two, God as Shepherd. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Shepherd” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God the gentle friend holding the lamb closely to the chest as the other sheep follow faithfully behind? Is God
walking in the midst of the sheep, with a covering made of their wool wrapped upon God’s shoulders, so that God might take upon their very smell, essence, and identity? Perhaps God is the tenacious sheepdog, herding the sheep into the safety of a rock enclosure when danger appears nearby. Maybe God is the weathered soul, resting in a quiet moment of Sabbath, breaking from the arduous work of tending and protecting, with a lamb lovingly upon God’s lap.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – being carried to a cool watering hole or following close behind God toward a field of tender green grass; looking upward at the large, but strange, “sheep,” mysteriously standing on two legs beside you and, yet, familiarly and gently nudging you forward with a staff of grace; frightened and shaking in your fleece at the sound of a hungry wolf’s call, trusting in the shaggy friend who stands between you and danger; or resting from a long day of playing and eating as you find the comfort of a soft and peaceful lap. Look out and see the pleasant pasture ahead, filled with clover blowing in the breeze. Smell the mixture of human sweat mingling with woven wool. Hear the sheepdog’s snarl as it backs down the sneering predator. Feel the calloused hand rub that soothing, sensitive place behind your ears as you drift into a soft slumber.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is a shepherd, leading us into a land of plenty, having wrapped Godself in the frailty of our human covering, rescuing us from danger, and granting us rest.
Script #3 – God as Bird

Narrator:

Images of God, session three, God as Bird. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Bird” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God the soaring eagle, majestic and strong? Is God the giving parent bird, feeding from God’s own mouth the many open and hungry mouths in the nest below? Perhaps God is the regal and pure dove, perched upon the roof of the building in which you sit now. Maybe God is the mother duck, nestling closely to her curious but vulnerable ducklings.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – riding upon the back of the bird of prey, safely hovering above all dangers and protected by the talons and beak of this raptor; settled in the security of your nest with your mouth opened wide expecting to be filled with the tasty offering provided from above; suddenly aware of an otherworldly presence through the coo of an overhead beauty; or being ushered underneath a wing with a loud quack, as you are calmed and warmed within a feathery bundle of acceptance. Feel the winds flow freely over your face as you fly. Taste the goodness, freely given to you, that satisfies your hungers. Watch in wonder as the
presence of purity swoops down to rest upon you. Listen to the voice of birdsong that calls you home.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is a gentle, yet powerful, bird, who causes you to soar, who feeds you within a home built especially for you, bringing you beauty and peace, and overshadowing you with grace.

**Script #4 – God as Mother**

**Narrator:**

Images of God, session four, God as Mother. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Mother” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God the gentle mother cradling you in her arms, with your cheek brushing up against her cheek? Is God holding you within the safety of the womb, sending strength, nourishment, and life to you through an umbilical connection? Perhaps God is caring for your simple needs, washing you clean and preparing you for rest. Maybe God is nursing you, feeding you out of the abundance of God’s own self.
Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – a baby cradled close to your mother’s heart; a fetus within the warm darkness of your mother’s womb; a child receiving the tender attention of a caring mother; or an infant looking into your mother’s eyes as you drink the sweet milk from her breast. Hear the words of your mother; listen to her sing over you. Feel her gentle breath upon your face. Smell the sweetness of her skin. Watch her smile form upon her face as your eyes meet.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is your good mother, holding you close, giving you life, caring for all your needs, and nourishing your soul.

**Script #5 – God as Fire**

*Narrator:*

Images of God, session five, God as Fire. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Fire” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God the small but powerful flame of a candle dismissing the darkness? Is God the mighty fireball overcoming the
night with overwhelming glory? Perhaps God is the refiner’s fire, purifying and testing. Maybe God is the raging bonfire, ready to consume all that is within its path.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – slowly awakening to a sliver of light that allows you to see ever more clearly where you were once shrouded in darkness; overcome by heat and fury, yet warmed and enlightened; being dipped within the magma of the firepot, all of your impurities dripping off of you and flowing outward to disappear in the liquid fire; or being overcome by the flames as they overtake your path, feeling their force within the depths of your soul. Smell the sweet aroma of smoke and fragrance as they combine in the air, dancing with peaceful flickers of illumination. See the flash in the night sky as your pupils narrow from the sudden flare. Feel the release of all that is impure as it melts off of your heart and mind. Hear the crackling of the flames as they engulf you, leaving behind the charred and fertile soil of re-creation.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is a fire, lighting your darkness, warming and guiding you, refining your soul, and consuming all that stands in the way.

Script #6 – God as Banquet Host

Narrator:

Images of God, session six, God as Banquet Host. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe
out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Banquet Host” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God pouring a hot cup of tea to soothe a weary traveler? Is God preparing a meal of grace for those who would seek mercy and intimacy? Perhaps God has released the storehouses of bountiful provisions so that a great feast might be made. Maybe God is carefully setting each place at a long table for honored guests.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – coming in from the cold and being warmed by a steaming cup and a kind smile; kneeling beside a simple wooden bench and being offered a morsel and a swig; being told by God to help yourself and filling your plate with the finest berries, wholesome breads, and savory meats; or choosing your place at the table, whether it be at the head, the foot, or somewhere in between. Smell the sweet aroma of the tea mixed with honey and cream. Feel the bread and juice sink into your inner being, making your body whole and invigorating your blood. Taste the sugar on your lips and the sauces on your tongue. Look to the host of the banquet and measure how close or how far away you are.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is a generous host, offering a bounteous feast at the divine banqueting table, welcoming you, sustaining you, filling you, and finding a place just for you.
Script #7 – God as Spouse

Narrator:

Images of God, session seven, God as Spouse. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Spouse” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God the giver of a passionate kiss as you wait in joyful, but anxious, anticipation? Is God standing by your side, holding tightly to the hand upon which a ring of promise was just placed? Perhaps God is the faithful spouse of your older years, having grown comfortable alongside you in love. Maybe God is the best friend who knows all your secrets and laughs with you at delights hidden from everyone else.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – a lover embraced within a whirlwind of passion by your beloved; a newlywed filled with hopes and fears as you set out upon the uncertain adventure of married life; the long-married senior wrapped securely within your beloved’s presence, your memories filled with celebrations and shared victories over struggle and sorrow; or the energetic soul confidently entering the prime of life with your most trusted friend. Feel the soft warmth of your lover’s lips. Listen to your marriage vows spoken over you. Smell the scent of
that familiar fragrance of love. Watch as the mouth of your beloved slips from a smile to a laugh as your eyes meet and you read one another’s thoughts.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is your beloved spouse desiring you, choosing you, staying faithful to you through good and bad times, and partnering with you in all of life’s adventures.

**Script #8 – God as Warrior**

*Narrator:*

Images of God, session eight, God as Warrior. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Warrior” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God courageously charging in to danger to save us, regardless of the potential harm to self? Is God taking up shield and sword to fight and conquer our spiritual enemies? Perhaps God is standing guard at a great citadel or gate ready to draw arms to prevent that which would do us harm from entering our dwelling. Maybe God is the intimidating figure adorned and painted, ready to strike fear into all who would challenge the people of God.
Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – upon your horse, back in the far ranks, ready to follow your fearless leader into battle so that good might prevail; ready to clothe yourself in the armor of God and engage the principalities and powers of evil in spiritual warfare; safely resting and working inside the city walls which are guarded by God the sentinel; or smearing the oily blue pigment on the brave one’s face and arranging the feathered headdress as you speak words of power and encouragement. Feel the adrenaline rush to every corner of your soul as your horse rears up and sprints into battle. See the light shimmer off the bright steel of the blade handed to you by God. Smell the primal fear of those who encounter the mighty one at the gates of the city. Hear the ancient war-song sung by the elders in the camp.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is the strong warrior who commands you, equips you, guards you, and fights for you.

**Script #9 – God as Gardener**

*Narrator:*

Images of God, session nine, God as Gardener. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”
Take the four photographs labeled “God as Gardener” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God breaking up the hard and stubborn ground, readying it for sowing and planting? Is God gently holding the tender, young plant, preparing to set it in the ground, cover it with dirt, and water it so that it will thrive? Perhaps God is taking the pruning tools in hand, ready to cut back the wild places and uproot the weeds. Maybe God is carefully examining the wheat, discerning if it is time for the harvest.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – the rocky ground ready to submit to God’s work of breaking you apart so that your life-giving potential might be released; fragile yet ready to take root, resting in God’s care and nourishment; enduring the painful, but necessary, snips as God frees you from your dead places that grow uncontrollably here and there; or being cut from your roots altogether, so that you might go to new places and provide beauty and nourishment for others. Watch as the boulders that once hid under the surface of your soul are dug up and cast aside with ease. Listen to the sound of the falling dirt as it covers you like an avalanche, followed by the rushing voice of the waters as they flood you with life. Feel the sharpness of the shears as they pinch you and separate you from that which steals your nutrients. Taste the rich ripeness of your own fruit, ready to be harvested so that God might use you to feed a hungry world.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is the gardener of your soul, clearing your soil, establishing your roots, directing your growth, and preparing you to bear fruit.
Script #10 – God as Monarch

Narrator:

Images of God, session ten, God as Monarch. We begin by stilling ourselves, finding a comfortable place and posture for reflection. Breathe in deeply through your nose, taking in the presence of God’s Spirit and letting the Spirit fill your mind. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, releasing all of the confusion or preoccupations of the mind. As you continue to breathe deeply, pray silently to God: “God and Creator of my mind center my thoughts upon you.”

Take the four photographs labeled “God as Monarch” on the back and lay them face up in front of you. Where do you see God in these images? Is God rising up to take rightful power and authority? Is God being crowned with glory and splendor? Perhaps God is descending to the level of the subjects, still powerful but committed to identifying with and abiding closely to those who live under divine rule. Maybe God is taking up residence in a majestic and grand castle where God will sit enthroned, entertaining guests in the heavenly court.

Now close your eyes. Imagine yourself in one of these scenarios – cheering in the crowd as God is proclaimed ruler over all the land; being enlisted to carry the crown, the crown that will soon rest upon God’s head, upon a pillow in a grand procession leading to the coronation ceremony; humbly bowing as God strolls through your workshop during an impromptu inspection of the country’s chief village; or being summoned for an audience with royalty in the throne room. Hear the roar of the crowd as they greet their new sovereign with excitement and approval. Watch as the jewels – red rubies, blue sapphires, green emeralds, purple amethysts, and white diamonds – shimmer in the light.
of the brilliant sun. Speak a word of appreciation for this gracious royal visit, through which you can share a glimpse of your life with your Majesty. Feel the nervousness, and yet honor, rising in the pit of your stomach as you walk, knees shaking, to greet one so high and lifted up.

Know that you are in the presence of God. What do you notice about God? What do you realize about yourself? How do you feel? What is God communicating to you? God is our sovereign monarch, ruling over us kindly, crowned in righteousness, humbly seeking us, and lovingly welcoming us into the divine realm.