

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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"Manus Dei"

Hebrew Scripture: Joshua 4:19-24

Symbols are meaning-makers. Humans crave to make meaning. We strive to make meaning because we want to communicate. And we want to communicate because we are, at our core, relational. We need symbols to make meaning, to communicate, and thus to be in relationship.

For the next few weeks, I invite you to make meaning with me; let's communicate; let us deepen our relationship with one another and with God by understanding some of the more prominent symbols of our faith. Today, we will learn about the 'Hand of God' as a symbol of the Creator (The First Person of Trinity, Father God, Mother God). Next week, we will learn about *Chi Rho* as a symbol for Jesus. Then the Dove will be explored as a representation of the Holy Spirit. Of course, we have to delve into the Cross as a symbol of eternal life. We will conclude our series with the ship as a symbol of the church.

In the scripture that Lee read for us, the protagonist is Moses' successor, Joshua. Many consider Moses to be the first and greatest prophet of the Hebrew testament. (Perhaps, Elijah comes a close second.) As we all know, it is tough to come after someone who is worthy of much praise. That is why it is with some

courage that I preach after Roger and Matt – because, as they say, ‘they are a tough act to follow’. So, it was with Joshua. Joshua had Moses’ big shoes to fill. In many ways, I feel sorry for Joshua. One senses he felt vulnerable and insecure. Earlier, in chapter three, the Lord said to Joshua, “Today I begin to exult you in the eyes of all Israel, so that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses” (Joshua 3:7). Here we learn that perhaps God was a little nervous about Joshua, as were the people, as was Joshua. So, we find in the Bible, what I referred to in other sermons, is a ‘typological reenactment’ or a ‘recurring motif’. God basically performed the same miracle through Joshua that God did with Moses. And guess what? No surprise here; in the Christian scriptures, Jesus also controlled the waters by calming a storm to demonstrate God’s solidarity with God’s prophet (Mark 4:35-41 and Matthew 8:23-27).

God is with Moses. God is with Joshua. God is with Jesus. God is with you. God is with me. That is the meaning of the scripture.

In our scripture, Joshua crossed the Jordan on dry land much as Moses did on the Red Sea floor. The Word says that God did this so as to demonstrate that “the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God” (Joshua 4:24). So, the ‘hand of God’ is symbolic of the presence of God and that presence’s power to liberate people – that includes you and I.

Christian iconography in books, museums, and churches throughout the world is replete with the symbol of the 'Hand of God', or known in Latin as '*Manus Dei*'. "There are more than one hundred references to the hand of God in the Bible".¹ Many books of the Bible refer to 'the hand of God' at least once. One can find the phrase in Exodus (15:6), Numbers (11:23), Deuteronomy (2:15), Ezra (8:18), Nehemiah (2:8), Job (12:9), Ecclesiastes (2:24), Isaiah (11:11), Jeremiah (1:9), Ruth (1:13), II Samuel (24:14), and I Peter (5:6).

Before we explore the Hand of God, allow me to first say that symbols are not perfect. They do not perfectly communicate. Come to think of it, neither do words. Come to think of it further, words themselves are in fact symbols. Symbols point to something else. They approximate. Yet, they do not convey exactly that which is intended to be conveyed. So, perhaps it is an imperative in this sermon series to state categorically that symbols are imperfect. They can possibly miscommunicate as well as they can communicate. Symbols, if taken literally, can even mislead. This sermon series will, of course, hopefully illuminate rather than lead astray.

Let us begin with how the 'hand of God' can mislead. First, of all, God has no hand. God is Love. To the extent that God has a hand, it is the hand of your

¹ Ratha Doyle McGee, *Symbols: Signposts of Devotion* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1962), 23. This entire series, in fact the title of the sermon series, is taken by this old publication.

lover (gay or straight), your child, or the paw of a pet. It is perfectly well and good to understand that God has a hand, if it is conceived to be symbolic and not literal. Hence, there is nothing wrong with envisioning 'God the Father'. Nothing. It is right and good to see God as a 'Father', provided you understand that 'Father' is a symbol, an imperfect symbol, and hence one should also hear of God as 'Mother'. Just as accurate. Just as inaccurate. So, God can be symbolically anthropomorphized. Yet, God should not be understood to be, literally, a divine human with a divine hand. There is no hand, folks. There just isn't. Sorry.

Just because God the Creator does not have a physical presence doesn't mean that the concept, the symbol, of the 'hand of God', is not a helpful and important means by which to communicate. The symbol of the 'hand of God' is almost always surrounded by the *cruciform nimbus*.² This circular symbol demonstrates that the 'hand of God' belongs to one of the three members of the Trinity. The combined symbol of the hand and cruciform is often referred to as *Dextra Domini*, or the "Right Hand of God". Again, this symbol is potentially harmful as it privileges right-handed people over left-handed people. Ag, symbols can be as unhelpful as they can be helpful.

The key aspect of the 'hand of God' symbol that I wish to focus upon is the manner in which the hand is extended in blessing. This is why we often see Pope

² McGee, *Symbols: Signposts of Devotion*, 23.

Francis or his cardinals, bishops, and priests motion with their hand in the form of a cross as if to say, “The blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”.

Let me conclude with a few words about ‘blessing’. Again, the word ‘blessing’, like all symbols, is imperfect, and if interpreted literally can mislead. When it comes to the ‘blessing of God’, I do not believe that, one, ‘God has a plan for us’. No, that is ‘predestination’ and it is a theological dead-end. Second, ‘blessing’ does not mean that God blesses us and therefore somehow God does not bless others. No. The ‘blessing of God’ refers to, one, God’s presence and love for us and for ALL people, unconditionally, for ALL people and God’s Creation (including animals, natural systems, and the Earth itself). Second, ‘God’s blessing’ does not imply that we are *rewarded* by God in this life or in the life after. No. ‘The blessing’ points to God’s intention or will for us to live to our fullest God-given potentials.

How does God bless us? First, with God’s presence. Just as God was present (not physically) with Moses and Joshua, so God is present in our lives in a very real way. God speaks to us (not audibly, at least to me) in a very real way. God listens to us. God encourages us. God strengthens us. God instills within us God’s Love for ourselves and others. God provides us with endurance. The hand of God provides God’s blessing in the form of assurance and peace. How is all that done with God’s

hand? Well, that is for you to discover with me in the fellowship of our beautiful church.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".