In 1927 the German physicist Werner Heisenberg formulated his famous uncertainty principle. The quick version of the uncertainty principle is that in the world of quantum physics you can know either a particle’s position or its velocity but you cannot know both at the same time. This of course led to a great joke where Heisenberg is pulled over by a policeman who asks, “Do you have any idea how fast you were going?” to which Heisenberg replies, “No, but I know exactly where I am.” Anyway, I bring this up to discuss something about the nature of God and how, in my experience, if we focus too much on one aspect of God, we lose our ability to understand a different aspect. So, for example in this morning’s reading we have a couple of lines from Jesus that, if taken in isolation, make it so we lose another characteristic of God. First Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” If this was all that we knew of being a disciple of Jesus we might come away thinking that the Christian life is one of pure drudgery and if we are not suffering then we are not really following Jesus. But, if we do this, we lose out on lines like the one in Matthew where Jesus says, “I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” That all sounds rather nice. So, which is it? In following Jesus, do we find rest and refreshment, or must we be nailed to a tree? And the answer is slightly unsettling. At least it is if we want certainty because both can be true. There are times when following Jesus is hard. Thankfully not as much for us in the United States but try being a Christian in North Korea – there will be plenty of opportunities to take up a cross there. However, we have probably all experienced times where we have felt the presence of God and the feeling that all would be okay; that is, we found rest for our souls in Jesus. They are, in some way, both true.

But that verse is not really where I want to have my focus today. Rather I want to focus on the second thing Jesus says in this passage after he talks about taking up the cross. Jesus says, “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.” It sounds pretty judgey – everyone is going to get what they have coming to them. The earth is going to look like the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel where God is sending boatloads of people to hell. And sadly, for some people, this is their favorite part of Christianity, the dream that one day they will be able to sit back and watch Jesus punish all of the people that they believe need punishing. But here again if this is all we hold onto and understand, what are we to do with passages like what we find in John’s Gospel where Jesus tells Nicodemus, “God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” There seems to be no wish for judgement there but rather the desire to save everyone. So, what we again need to ask which one of these is true. I am not sure that I have a perfect answer but let me try.

I think, the real problem in this seeming contradiction is, and I say this with all the love I can, we are stupid. Sure, we come off looking pretty good if we compare ourselves to a chicken or a sleeper sofa but not when compared with God. And so, when faced with the mysteries of God, we come up with some pretty stupid ways in which to try and understand. For the fact of the matter is we cannot even come close to understanding God, but sadly that does not stop us from trying to say exactly how God is and how exactly He will behave in any situation. But in order to do this, that is in order to explain exactly how God is we need to make God fit into our little brains. And generally, the easiest way to make God fully comprehensible is to take one passage of scripture and make it encapsulate the entirety of God. And depending on which church you attend there is the possibility of seeing some very different descriptions of the nature of God especially when it comes to today’s discussion – God is a harsh judge who is ready to clear his threshing floor or God is forgiving and loving and just want to make sure we are fully self-actualized. But the truth is that we have straight from the lips of Jesus statements that God can be both and, at least for us humans, this can be hard to reconcile. And so, the best I can come up with to understand this is to think about our lives and the different ways we were at various times and places. At least for me, when I take time to reflect, I realize that there were and surely will be times where I needed God to be one or the other. For I know that there were times in my life where I got a little too comfortable and came across like Heinrich Heine on his deathbed saying, “God will forgive me, that’s his job.” In times like that I needed to realize that there is an order to the universe and that someone was watching my behavior. Put another way, I needed to be scared straight. I needed to realize that God has certain expectations of me. However, there have been other times where life has been difficult where I did not need a lecture about God’s rules and regulations but rather what I need and what God provides is love and comfort. And I am sure anyone who has been a parent recognizes these two things. There are times where the kids needed to be shaken back into reality and there are times where they need to be told that we are there for them and that everything will be okay.

It is very strange that we, who are created in the image of God, want to give so few of our own characteristics to God. We want God to be exactly one way at all times and in all places. But as St. Gregory of Nyssa reminds us God is so vast there will always be more of God to discover. So, if we put God in amber, we have also put our faith in amber. It will be stagnate and we all know what stagnate things are like. I mean do you want to take a drink out of a moving stream or out of a mud puddle? But here I need to make one caveat. When we say there is a vastness to God this does not mean that God is changing but rather that there is more we are discovering. When we say that God can be both a God of judgement and a God of love this is not because of some sort of capriciousness on God’s part but rather because they are parts of a vast whole. We may not fully understand how all of it fits together, but that is our problem not God’s.

I think one of the issues with Christianity today is that churches are giving us a simplified God by either presenting a God who wants to smite everyone or on that approves of everything we do. Yes, God can be a little hard to understand but so can reality. In fact, I cannot even fully understand myself and there I have inside knowledge. But going back to Heisenberg when we know too much about one thing, we lose our ability to know something else. God is vast and wonderful and mysterious. Our job is not to simplify but to push on ahead growing in our love and knowledge of him so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.