

The Image of the Invisible God

Colossians 1:15-20

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Christmas! Wonderful time in America! Presents. Fun to receive. Sometimes very frustrating to buy! For two months, Charlotte and I asked each other, "What do you want for Christmas?" The answer always was, "I don't know." To which the other would reply, "Well, that's no help!"

I know people who love to go shopping. Not me. Especially not for Christmas presents. I get so frustrated looking for presents. Now, after Christmas, all those clothes that do not fit and have to be exchanged! A jacket. Too big. To the store. "I am sorry, Sir, but we don't have any in a size smaller. I will refund you the money." Fine. Go down the mall and try another store. "Don't have your size." Another store. Another store. God and my parents created me the wrong size!

Where do I find one of the right size?

Ever wanted to find God, and just could not? You wanted to get in touch with God, but just could not? Trying to find God can be as frustrating as looking for Christmas presents and the right size. Join me in prayer.

Prayer: Lord, we use words for you that we cannot understand; they just suggest what is signified, words such as Almighty, Eternal, All Loving, Creator of the Universe, Everlasting, Immortal, Invisible, All-Knowing. Our puny minds struggle to grasp who you are, but you are so much more than we can intellectually learn or emotionally take in. So, O God, our prayer is that you will bless us with what we need in order to be people of faith. Amen.

God is hidden and invisible. Have you ever smelled God? That is a silly question. Have you seen God? Tasted God? Touched God? Maybe you have heard or sensed God.

When something is hidden and invisible, we may jump to the conclusion that it does not exist. That is what atheists do. Since God is not physical, and scientifically verifiable, God must not exist.

But, the question of God persists. The question is voiced in such thoughts as: What is behind all this this whole world? Does life have any profound and timeless meaning? Ever have a vague sense of a presence with you? Who, what was the presence? We give it the name, God. People in very trying circumstances ask me, "What did I do to deserve this? Why did God let me down?"

One of the obvious characteristics of God is invisibility, hiddenness.

Where would you look for God?

Have you heard it said that you should look at the physical world to find God? On winter days, when the sky is lifeless gray, and the oaks are dull brown sticks, I do not think of God. (God must have created winter after a bad night.) Then, of course, there is the ice. Ice is fine in my iced tea. On the street, it scares me. On the morning of the snow fall, Dec. 5, I was coming from home without difficulty. An SUV in front of me on a hill had rear-wheel drive. His wheels started to spin, and the machine started to twist, and slip backward toward me. I thought that I was going to get bumped by his right side post. Ice scares me. It terrifies older people. They stay inside. Understandably. They should. Now, what kind of God would create icy conditions that keep older people shut in? The same God who created sunny summer, and the rain for drinking water and boating. So, what is God like, the winter's dreary sky and ice, or summer's sunshine and rain? It is confusing to look at the natural world and try to discern who God is.

Where else may we look for God?

We may look for God in our minds. During the middle ages, this approach was popular in the monastic movement. We do not know much about mysticism in America. We are doers and achievers, rather than mystics. And, when we hear of mysticism it is an Asian philosophy or a relaxation methodology. The general idea is to empty the mind of emotions and thoughts. With practice and discipline, we remove interference, like adjusting the dial on the radio to tune out static, until what remains is the experience of God. However, are we sure what we will find? We may find Satan; we may uncover demonic emotions and thoughts, maybe surging urges to kill or images that terrify us. Or, we may find inner peace that we attribute to a source outside us, God. What we find when we look into our minds is unpredictable.

Getting frustrated with me and this sermon, because it does not seem to go anywhere? I am. Finding God is like playing a game of hide and seek. Playing hide and seek with a three-year-old is hilarious. Ever done it? The three year-old hides behind the sofa and we are to find her. Pretending, we search the other side of the room, saying loudly so she can hear, "I wonder where she could be." She darts out, face beaming, "Here I am! Here I am!"

God steps out and shouts, "Here I am! Here I am!" We look and do we see God? No! What do we see? A person! A human! A baby! Jesus!

It is ridiculous! A contradiction to the obvious: God and humans are not the same. We are not God. Nevertheless, that is the Gospel proclamation: God reveals self in a person who was born in a stable in Bethlehem, grew up in the town of Nazareth, worked as an itinerant minister for three years helping people and telling people of God's will, crucified for what he said, and resurrected from death to live in both God's glory and in the hearts of his followers.

This is not obvious! This is preposterous! It requires what Kierkegaard called a leap of faith, a jump across the chasm of rationality and sensibility. But, if you make the leap, you will discover God approaching you in the person of Jesus.

We call this self-revelation of God, incarnation. God approaches us in a human being, Jesus born in Bethlehem. Jesus is God actualizing the divine self in flesh and blood.

When I taught ninth-grade confirmation class, I asked, "What is 'incarnation'?" They replied something like this, "If you're bad, you will come back as a rat." They knew about reincarnation, but did not understand incarnation—the essential tenet of our theology. God became incarnate in Jesus. It is not rational. But, it is the Gospel. The hidden and invisible God made self visible in the person of Jesus.

And in the person of Jerry Landers. We had fun with Jerry Landers when he met God in the movie "Oh, God". Some of the theology of the movie was grossly heretical, but some was refreshingly presented orthodoxy. God speaks with Jerry Landers in an empty room, except for a speaker-phone. Jerry can not figure out what is going on. The voice tells Jerry to spread the message that God exists. God says people "have been going around saying that I'm dead or worse." "That I never was, or what I was, was a gas or shmutz." "You know, particles. With the big bang theories and the little bang theories. When you're God, it's insulting."

Later Jerry Landers is taking his shower and guess who shows up in the bathroom with him...God...God in the form of older man in sneakers. It is so ridiculous that it is funny. God as older man in sneakers in the bathroom? It is just as ridiculous as God showing up in a stable in the form of a baby born to poor parents—God coming as a human baby, delivered in a barn, with straw as his bedding and a feed box for his bassinet. If it were not so familiar to us, it would make us laugh, or snort in sarcasm. The Almighty, Eternal, Creator, Sustainer and Judge of the universe revealing self as a baby there? Inappropriate. So bizarre that it should be a comical. A cartoon fantasy. Nevertheless, the heart of the Christian belief!

Jesus is the visible presence of the invisible God!

The Apostle goes even farther in our text! He announces that all things were created through Jesus and for Jesus! He existed before all things, and he holds all together. Wow!! That is far beyond my intellectual

grasp. But, I feel the majesty, the power, the grandeur. This Jesus is flesh and blood as am I, but he personifies God. And, the description continues. He is the head of the church. He is the firstborn to be raised from the dead. First in everything. In him dwells all of God. Through his blood on the cross, God reconciles all things. Incredulous! I am in awe.

Yet, he was born as we were. Yet, born in a stable, to poor parents, in an occupied country! That was not accidental. God choose that birth, because it would communicate potent messages. Think about the nativity. Invite God's Spirit to lift you on your leap of faith, and you will encounter God coming to you. What are the messages about God in the birth?

For one, a month after Jesus was born, his parents took him to the Temple for a religious ceremony, a very strange ceremony to us. It is recorded in Luke 2:22-24. The idea was that the first-born belonged to God and parents purchased back the child from God with an offering. Luke states, "And they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'." If they had wealth, they would have offered a year-old lamb. That they only had a couple of common birds to offer suggests being poor. All of us understand the difference between being born a Kennedy or Gates instead of a Lincoln or Winsheimer. Without being told, we catch the significance of God identifying with have-nots. God loves poor people as well as rich people, or God would have been born to different parents in a mansion or in a palace. We learn truths about God in the place and the family into which God chose to be born.

Less obvious, but still easily sensed, is the style of relationship God would have with us. Babies do not carry clubs, or fly F16s. They do not have a Ph.D. They have no power in society. They are helpless. But they can soften the hardest heart, win the dedicated work of mothers and fathers, thrill the grandparents, and get the aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters competing for the chance to hold them. A baby's power is winsomeness. God did not come to beat us into respecting God as God. God did not come to overwhelm us with God's importance. Through living drama, God tells us that our money, education, status and power are not what God values. (God may use those as tools to accomplish God's work; that certainly is true!) Basically God values us for our personhood. This week many parents wanted their children to come home for Christmas. I would not be surprised if some of you paid for the airplane tickets for your children to come home for the holidays. Why do you want them to come home? Because they are powerful, wealthy, educated and celebrities? You want them to come because they are your children, and you love them! That is why God wants to relate with us! To God we are as children. God came in Jesus to win our affection, to call us home.

The baby, creator, teacher, reconciler, resurrected savior, sovereign, head-of-the-church image of God is a living image. We will say as an "Affirmation of Faith" what Paul wrote, "Christ is the image of the invisible God." Note the tense, "is" not "was". There is a sense of present reality through grace, imagination and faith. He lives. Not only did God reveal the divine self back then in Jesus. By the dynamics of the Holy Spirit, God today reveals the divine self to us through Jesus' story. He still calls us to make the leap of faith in Jesus, so that we may be blessed with the knowledge and experience of God. Jesus has timeless relevancy.

If you want to find God, look at Jesus!

Now, if you have made that leap and been blessed by God with faith, I invite you to join enthusiastically in the reading aloud the edited text as an Affirmation of Faith.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. In him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible.

All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

