

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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John 1:18

"Making God Known"

Matthew's account of the Nativity tells us that the newborn child would be called *Immanuel* - "God with us." John sums up his account of the Incarnation by saying "No one has ever seen God, but the only-begotten One has made him known." It is a remarkable statement: if you want to know about God, look at Jesus! *Jesus makes God known*; he is "the image of the invisible God", according to Paul (Col 3:15); "the exact representation of his being," according to the book of Hebrews (Heb 1:3). Jesus himself says as much. "Lord, show us the Father," said his friend Philip. "Have I been with you so long and still you do not know me?" said Jesus; "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

1) *God In Human Form*

The Christian claim is that Jesus reveals God; that he was *God in human form*. It is an extraordinary claim. It is the reason for our Christmas celebrations. What would it mean for us to take it seriously?

We would first have to take note that God came into the world as a male embryo in the womb of a young woman. He was born in the 1st C. to a peasant family in the rural province of Galilee - "in some small corner of the earth somewhere," sneered the Roman historian Eusebius. His birth occurred in

what was probably a cave used to shelter animals, and his first visitors were shepherds from the hillsides. He grew up in a family with several brothers and sisters, their livelihood coming from an artisan father who was a carpenter in a small village. Jesus no doubt learned the same trade.

His environment might seem unpromising, but God also took human form in a culture that for 2000 years had been prepared to see his hand at work in all of life; among people who had been taught God's Law and how to live before him. He was born a Jew; lived his life within Jewish culture; practiced Judaism. Jesus' childhood, according to the oldest accounts, was normal; but he did surprise everyone when by the age of twelve, he had acquired a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Hebrew Bible than educated people many times his age. He was, you might say, a precociously knowledgeable child in the ways of God - surely a sign of what was to come! But in other ways he was quite normal - an adolescent boy who could chide his anxious parents for not trusting him when he went missing for days.

He spent 30 years in a small provincial village and apparently learned there all he needed to know. He never, as far as the

records show, set foot in the nearby city of Tiberias, built when he was a young man and named for the Roman Emperor who ruled his country from afar. What he did in those 30 years we do not know, but when he finally emerged into the public eye, he amazed people with his authority as a teacher, even though he had no formal rabbinic training.

He gathered a small group of friends, taken from all walks of life; a few of them financially comfortable, some disreputable, mostly "working men" with minimal education. He was often found in the company of tax-collectors, lepers and prostitutes. Peasants from Galilee and Judea followed his teaching, his healing, and his miracles in great numbers, although the more educated rabbis, scribes and priests did not. He was unusually respectful and friendly to women, he mixed freely with outcasts, and he valued children at a time when most people treated them like servants. He traveled to Gentile territory east of Jordan, and to Phoenician coastal towns, and a few times to Jerusalem to visit the Temple. He gathered no possessions, appears never to have married, or owned a home, or written a book.

He taught that spiritual life was more important than material possessions, that true religion was internal and not external, that God knows the heart and calls people to accept his rule over them – to "enter his kingdom." He favored forgiveness, prayer, generosity, fidelity; he abhorred pride, formal religious observance, and above all, hypocrisy. He was a great story-teller. When he met opposition he faced it non-violently, and forgave his persecutors. He thought it no robbery to die at the age of 33, saying his work was finished, and committing himself into God's hands, sure that he would be vindicated. Three days later, his tomb was found empty, and for six weeks he appeared

frequently among his friends. His public life had lasted three years, but in that time he shook the world.

2) *How Should We Then Live?*

This was the life of "God in human form." How should we who claim to be followers of this Jesus respond? How does it impact our lives that *this* is how God was made known among us? How should Christians - as we are now called - live if we are to be Jesus' disciples?

Start at the beginning. Do we respect human life, even in embryonic form? Or do we side with those who see it as manipulable, disposable, a subject for research, a place to harvest useful cells? 25 years ago, when I dabbled in bioethics, I asked someone who was then a member of the Presidential Council on Bioethics if there was any one ethical concept that all members of the council were agreed upon. He said there was: "the sanctity of human life." That was then. 25 years later we live in what Pope John Paul II aptly called a "culture of death."

Moving on: if we are Christians, do we value home and family as the place where children can be trained spiritually, as well as emotionally, intellectually and socially? Do family relationships, honest work, a simple life, mean as much to us as acquiring technology, or affluence, or influence? When we are home, do we spend more time with our computers than our children? Do we believe that Jesus was right when he said "a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"? Or do we still imagine that if we only earned double what we do now, life would be so much better?

If we are Christians, do we place any priority and give any time to learning the Bible, or Christian history? Or are we content to muddle along with the little we know? When we are confronted with vigorously atheistic

writers like Sam Harris (*Letter To A Christian Nation*) or Daniel Dennett (*Breaking The Spell*) or Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, now # 6 on the *NY Times* bestseller list); people who want (as Harris says) to “shake America out of its ignorance” and “demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity,” do we have anything to say in defense? To be sure, their ignorance about the Christianity they despise is astonishing, but are we Christians any better informed? One reviewer wondered if Harris “has ever spoken with any living, breathing Christians?” But what if he had? Would he have a better view of Christianity? Do we take study of our faith with any seriousness at all, or do we assume that we already know enough, and that the quality of our lives as Jesus’ disciples speaks for itself? Ought we not all be a little nervous at this point!?

If we are disciples of Jesus, do we value - as he did - the time God has given us to follow his call? Can we imagine devoting three years of our lives so fully to anything - let alone to the kingdom of God - that at the end we could say “it is finished”? Or are we either “so busy,” or still waiting for the right conditions, that we never quite get around to doing anything important? Do we think that if our week consists in working, driving our children, and shopping, that we have used the time God gives us in the best way?

What *does* it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? What do we learn from the way he showed us “God in human form”? Is it all ancient history, irrelevant to people of the 21st C.? To be sure, we cannot go back to a pre-urban, pre-industrial, pre-technological age. Even though we might sometimes like to, we can not become modern-day Henry David Thoreaus, going to live in a cabin in the woods at Walden Pond. But equally surely, we ought at certain times to stop and think about how we live and what we value. Tonight we gather in the season of lights and garlands and wreaths and gifts, supposedly

to celebrate God’s coming to earth as a human being. But if his example of living teaches us nothing, if it has no impact on our thinking or our ethics or our priorities or our spending, then what are we celebrating?

3) *Grace and Truth*

John says that Jesus the only-begotten revealed God, and brought “grace and truth” into our world. God in human form came to teach us and show us the truth about God, about ourselves, about the world. God in human form came to show us grace - that is, the favor of God that allows us to live in love, forgiveness, hope.

If we claim to be followers of Jesus the Christ who was born in Bethlehem, we should pray that this Christmas we will learn as never before what it means to embrace the truth about who we are, the truth about who God is, the truth about how we are called to live; and then that we will live out that truth before a world that is often confused and darkened. And we should pray that the grace that is in Jesus will also be in us, so that by our gracious treatment of other people we will show the world that “God is a God of grace.”

Jesus makes God known- we no longer have to wonder what God is like, whether he loves us, what he thinks of our world, or of family, of marriage, of learning, of religious practice. We no longer have to wonder if God is angry with us, or whether he even understands what it’s like to live in this world.

Jesus makes God known to us, and he makes it possible for us to approach his Father and ours with trust and confidence and without fear. So *this* is what God is like! He starts out as a baby. He’s been here. He knows about us! We have reason to be glad, and to celebrate his coming!

Let us pray...

