

Christmas: The Invisible Made Visible

Jn. 1:1-18

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(Sermon Notes/Transcript)

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This morning we learned that Jesus is the revelation of who God is, of what God is like, of how he has lived from all eternity. Jesus is one with God reveals God as he is in himself. Tonight I want to continue that thought in several different directions.

In John 20, we're told the purpose of John's gospel. Just as John is drawing his narrative to a close, he says, "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

John's gospel presents Jesus as God's self-revelation, as God's self-disclosure. When you've seen Jesus, you've seen God in action. It's not as though God has sent Jesus to us, while the *real* God is like the Wizard Oz, hiding behind a curtain. No, in Jesus, we come to discover the true character and nature of God himself. The curtain/veil is torn; God has opened himself up to us. Once you find Jesus, the quest for God, for understanding and meaning and purpose, is over. There's nothing left to find beyond or behind him.

John 1 helps us understand this in two ways, and I want to unpack them both tonight.

1. Jesus solves the "problem" of the invisibility of God.

Look at verses 16, 17 and 18. John brings Moses into the discussion for purposes of comparison. The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ. Now, we need to be careful how we understand this. John is not saying that Moses or his law were somehow sinful or bad. Just the opposite, in fact. The law is good, it was a gift of God to Israel. But like Moses, the law could not bring the people of God into the promised land of the new creation.

The law was not God's final plan for his people. It was a temporary measure to help them along the way to something better, to something more permanent.

The law came from God through Moses. In fact, the law was gracious. That, I think, is the meaning of verse 16 – "we have received grace in place of grace." A kind of grace, a form of grace, came through Moses. But now a greater grace has come through Jesus.

John is not pitting Moses against Jesus as if they were enemies. Moses and Jesus are the best of friends. But Moses is sort of a proto-John the Baptist. He prepares the way for one greater than himself. His law is a shadow of the good things to come in Christ, a blueprint of the coming gospel.

When John says that grace and TRUTH have come through Jesus Christ, he's not implying that the revelation given through Moses was false. Rather, Moses gave the *promise* – and now the fulfillment of that promise, the truth of that promise, has been realized in Christ.

The contrast in John's gospel is not between what is false and what is true, but between what was promised in the types and shadows of the Old Covenant and what is brought to realization and fulfillment in Christ.

Christ, you might say, is a greater Moses. He accomplishes a greater exodus than Moses did. He defeats a greater enemy than Pharaoh. He gives a new and better commandment. He offers a better sacrifice than was offered at the tabernacle Moses set up. And unlike Moses, he doesn't just lead the people of God up to the edge of the promised land; Jesus actually takes us into the new creation, the new world.

But none of these things get at the real heart of the matter. John has plugged the figure of Moses into the prologue of his gospel for one very specific reason. And that reason is suggested in verse 18: "No one has seen God at any time." Moses never got to see God. The law did not provide the people with a vision of God. In fact, it kept the sight of God hidden behind veils in the Most Holy Place.

There is a sense in John's gospel in which *seeing is believing*. John suggests that we come to know God in seeing him, in beholding him.

Jesus knows the Father because he sees him – Jn. 5:19 – "the Son can do nothing of himself, except what he SEES the father doing."

It's the same for the followers of Jesus.

Jn. 6:40 "everyone who SEES the Son and believes him has everlasting life"

Jn. 11:45 It's those who "see" the works Jesus did who believe in him

In Jn. 20, Thomas comes to believe when he SEES the resurrected Christ

Jn. 14:7 Philip's request is "SHOW us the Father"

But behind Philip's request to see God is Moses' request to see God in Exodus 33. Philip asks Jesus to give him what Moses asked for and was denied. Philip wants what Moses could not have.

In Exodus 33, Moses asks God, "Show me your glory!" And how does God reply? He says to Moses, "I can't show myself to you, for no man can see Me and live. I will not show you my face, only my backside." And then God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers him with his hand and then passes by him.

We know that the Exodus is in the background here in John 1 because when John writes that Jesus is full of grace and truth in verses 14 and 18, he uses the exact same language God uses to describe himself in passing by Moses back in Exodus. God said to Moses he was abounding in love (or mercy or grace) and faithfulness (or truthfulness). John says the thing about the Word made flesh – he is abounding in grace and truth, or mercy and faithfulness. It's the same description. It's the same God revealing himself

But even more importantly, in Ex. 33, when Moses said "Show me your glory!," God had to respond with a qualified no. *But in John 14, when Philip asks the same question, "Show us the*

Father!” Jesus says, “What are you talking about?! I’ve already shown you the Father. If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father. If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the glory of God.”

In other words, if we put it all together, Jesus is the answer to the prayer of Moses. Moses asked to see God’s glory, he asked to see God face-to-face. In Jesus, that’s what we get – a face-to-face look at God, a revelation of God’s glory.

John 1:14: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us AND WE BEHELD HIS GLORY”

John 1:18: No one – including Moses – has seen God upclose and face-to-face – But the Son who HAS seen the Father’s glory now declares, or shows it, to us.

In other words, the incarnation is all about *making the invisible glory of God visible*. It’s all about God *showing* himself to us. God no longer covers us with his hand and passes by with his back turned. He has opened himself up to us in the incarnation. The invisible has been made visible.

See, this is what Christmas celebrates. This is why it’s entirely appropriate – perhaps even necessary in a way – for us to give presents to one another, and, yes, to wrap those presents up. We veil our gifts under colored paper, just God veiled himself under the curtains of the tabernacle. But at Christmas, we tear through that paper and SEE the gift someone has for us. At that first Christmas, God began to tear open the veil that kept his glory hidden for thousands of years. The incarnation is the best Christmas present of all because it’s the gift of the glory of God – God has unwrapped himself and unhidden himself and shown himself to us. In Jesus Christ we behold the glory of God, we see his face, we see him as he is.

It’s interesting -- When the construction of the tabernacle of Moses was completed in Exodus 40, the glory of God descended from heaven to take up residence there in his new home. *But when God moved in, everyone else had to move out.* Ex. 40:35 says not even Moses was able to enter because of God’s glory. But the incarnation is something of a revolution in God’s way of dealing with his people. Now, in Jesus, we BEHOLD God’s glory. We see God, we dwell with him and in him. If you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen the Father. If you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen the glory of God. If you’ve seen Jesus, you’ve seen the invisible God made visible.

But there’s more.

2. Jesus not reveals True God, he also reveals True Man.

The incarnation answers the problem of “How can I trust a God I cannot see?”

But it actually does more. The church confesses that Jesus Christ is the God-man, two natures in one person. The eternal Son of God assumed to himself a complete human nature. So he has all the properties of God and all the properties of a true human being.

He had to be true God in order to reveal God to us and redeem us. Anything less would’ve left us to save ourselves. And he had to be true man in order to fully connect us back to

God. If he was only partially human, our humanity could receive only an imperfect, incomplete redemption. The bridge back to God wouldn't stretch all the way.

Some in the early church said Jesus had a human body, but the divine Logos took the place of the soul or took the place of reason. But the orthodox church fathers had a slogan "whatever is not assumed is not healed." In other words, if there's any part of what it means to be human – the mind, the body, the will, the emotions, the soul – that the eternal Son did not take to himself in becoming man, we still aren't saved.

The church fathers, as they wrestled through the mystery of the incarnation, insisted that the divine and human natures did not get mixed together into some new third kind of thing. That too would be a monstrosity and would not suffice for our redemption.

The point of the incarnation is that God has become man without ceasing to be God. Jesus is fully God, and fully man. He is God of God and man of man. The incarnation means that the eternal Son of God has experienced all of human life as a real man. The person of the Son experienced human birth, human growth, human hunger and thirst, human weakness, human ignorance, human suffering, and, yes, even human death.

Peter Leithart has drawn out some of the significance of this. Leithart says that to say that the person of the Son of God took to himself the human nature of the man Jesus is to say that the whole story of the man Jesus is also the story of God himself. The story of Jesus is not two parallel stories, one about a divine being and another about a really powerful human, that occasionally intersect. We should never read the gospel stories about Jesus as if some parts were about what God is doing and other parts are about what the man Jesus is doing. No, the whole person does everything. Whatever Jesus does God does. Whatever God does in Jesus is also done by the man himself. The whole story of the gospel – from birth through death and resurrection – is the story of the Son of God who became flesh.

It's very interesting that in the early church, perhaps the most pervasive heresy was Arianism, named after Arius. The Arians denied that Jesus was fully God; instead they taught that Jesus was the greatest of God's creatures. You know why the Arians denied that Jesus could be true God? Because he suffered and died! They said God couldn't do that! They said God was almighty, so he was too powerful, too exalted to be subjected to human misery and suffering. God is immortal – how can the immortal one undergo death on a cross? Isn't that a contradiction in terms?

The biblical, orthodox answer was NO! That's the whole point. God has humbled himself. The infinite one became an infant. The immortal one died. The Creator became a creature. The eternally begotten one was born of a woman in a cave in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. The one who upheld the universe was held up in his mother's arms. The one who possessed all things cried out for his mother's milk. The King of angels became the son of a lowly carpenter. The one who was heir of all things gave all things up. That's the wonder of the gospel, the wonder of Christmas, the wonder of the Christian hope, the wonder of it all – it's the most wonderful thing in the universe!

Martin Luther had it right. He said of the baby Jesus, “I know of God but this infant in a manger!” He said of the cross, “I know of no God but this one hanging on an accursed tree for me!”

See, when God reveals himself to the world, how does he do it? In humility. In love. In sacrifice. In lowliness. Yes, he is the exalted God too, and that comes at the end of Jesus’ story.

But again, Luther got it exactly right.

He said, “The true Christian religion is incarnational and thus does not BEGIN at the top, as all other religions do; *it begins at the bottom*. You must run directly to the manger and the mother’s womb, embrace the infant and virgin’s child in your arms and look at – born, being nursed, growing up, going about in human society, teaching, dying, rising again, ascending above all the heavens, and having authority over all things.”

The story of Jesus is the story of God. And with qualifications, of course, it’s to be our story as well. We are to humble ourselves and in the right time God will exalt us. We are to take the posture that God took in the incarnation – the posture of a servant – and in due time God will make us kings. As Augustine thundered, “How can it be? God has humbled himself, and yet still man is proud!” The incarnation is a lesson to each of us that the way up is the way down, that the road to glory is the road of self-giving, self-sacrificial love.

Let’s spell out a little more fully what this means and how it applies.

In the incarnation, God becomes man. But neither nature is distorted into something else. Each nature retains its integrity.

Deity and humanity retain their true shape. In fact, it’s only in looking at Jesus Christ, the God-man, that we come to understand what true deity and true humanity are really like. In Jesus, God’s purposes for himself *and* his purposes for humanity come to fruition at the same time. Jesus not only redefines who God is, he also redefines what it means to be human.

This morning I suggested that God’s incarnation is a model for us. Like Jesus, we are to incarnate God’s healing presence and love and light and life to a hurt and dying and dark world. In the incarnation, God reveals himself as a God who is *for us*, and so we are to live incarnationally, meaning we are to live *for others*.

Or to change the imagery a bit in light of what verses 14 and 18: In the incarnation, the invisible God has made himself visible to man. He has made his love and grace and mercy and truth manifest. The calling of the church as the tabernacle of God and the body of Christ is to GO ON making that love and grace and mercy and truth visible to the world. We are to reveal what God is really like. We are to show the world the Father, we are to unwrap or unveil the glory of God before a needy and broken world so that others can have the same vision of God in Christ that we have had.

But there's more. Not only does the incarnation put on display the true nature of God; it also reveals what true humanity looks like. See, to live and minister incarnationally means not only being an instrument through which God's love is made real in the world. It also includes showing what it means to be God's new and true humanity. If we live incarnationally, we'll not only show what true Godhood looks like but also true manhood.

Some in the early church had the opposite problem of the Arians. They were called Docetists, and they claimed that while Jesus was fully God, he only *appeared* to be human. He wasn't a real man. And some Christians take that approach to spirituality too: if you're *really* spiritual it's almost like you're not really human. And they so they withdraw themselves from whatever aspects of human society they think might corrupt them. They locate the problem of sin not in their own hearts, but in the world outside them. They become ingrown and inward facing. They don't engage their community with the gospel. They shut themselves out of the world and live only for themselves. They think that holiness is ethereal and otherworldly and doesn't really address the concerns of earthly human life. They think holiness means separating yourself from the physical or from unholy people.

The incarnation points us in just the opposite direction. When we read the gospels, we find that Jesus is very earthy. He grew up as a manual laborer. He called stinky, smelly fisherman to serve with him. He got accused of being a drunkard and a glutton because he enjoyed the good things in life. Everywhere he went, he was the life of the party. He was always telling jokes (like the one about getting the camel through the eye of the needle). He could be sneaky and sarcastic. He was anything but a tame, withdrawn recluse. He was anything but otherworldly. He was holy, of course, but in ways that surprise and confound our preconceptions.

But Jesus wasn't just a man who enjoyed the good life. He also ministered in word and deed to those in need. He showed hospitality. He fed the hungry. He reached out to children and the lame and the blind and the suffering. He crossed over barriers by talking to gentiles and women. And he criticized the religious and political leaders of his day when occasion called for it. He wasn't afraid of messing with politics or other "worldly" matters.

This is all part of what it means to live incarnationally.

On the one hand, Christianity is, as Chesterton put, "a thick steak and a good cigar." It's stout beers and baseball games. It's about telling jokes and laughing easily. It's about working hard and playing hard. It's about fine music and good conversation on the front porch. It's about reading old stories to children and cutting the grass. It's about hunting and fishing and changing the spark plugs and cooking a hot meal on a cold winter's night dinner.

As the great Dutch theologian A. A. Van Ruler said, "We become Christian in order to be fully human." The church fathers had a saying: "God became man in order that man might become God" (in the sense of God-like). But Luther turned it around: "God became man in order that man might become true man again." In the incarnation, God begins to re-humanize us, to undo what sin has marred and corrupted. See, Christianity does not negate our humanness, it restores it. The gospel doesn't negate our humanness; it fulfills it. Part of living incarnationally is taking in the whole range of blessings that God has placed

within his creation. It means that we can eat, drink, and be merry, for we know these are the gifts of God.

But there's another side to it as well, and we dare not forget it. To live incarnationally is to live like Jesus lived as True God and True Man. It's to be the body of Christ in the world. But remember what happened to the body of Christ!! That body was broken. It was stripped naked. It was whipped. *It was crucified.*

If we are going to live and minister incarnationally, we will often find ourselves going where no one else wants to go, doing what no one else wants to do. We'll find ourselves doing what Jesus did -- going after the lost, the hurting, the suffering, and sharing in their pain.

We'll find ways to help those in need. That may mean physical need. After all, Jesus didn't just *teach* about God's love, he *enacted* it in doing good deeds. And we're to do the same, helping the poor and downtrodden as we come cross paths with them. We're to feed the hungry and heal the sick and clothe the naked.

But in many cases (for us today) it may mean helping those in psychological or spiritual need -- the lonely, the guilty, the overstressed, the underappreciated. Our neighborhoods and workplaces are filled with these sorts of people, who live quite comfortably on the outside but who ache with pain inside. They need to see the Father's glory. The question is: Will we show it to them? And if we don't who will?

This is what we're called to do. Incarnational living is multi-dimensional. It has many facets. We can't pick and choose. We have to strive to live it out in all its different aspects. But as we do, we find God blessing us and exalting us more and more as we go.

Let's pray.