

## NOW IN FLESH APPEARING

“We adore you, Lord Jesus Christ, in all the churches of the whole world and we bless you, for by means of your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” Those words of St. Francis of Assisi would tell you what you need most to know about Jesus, except perhaps how to approach Him and learn more about the nature of redemption. What we know about Jesus fills only a portion of the Bible, and yet if we would scour the pages of the Old Testament we would find Him there too.

In these next weeks I want us to know Christ as we have never known Him before. Perhaps we think we are well acquainted with Him, and that’s likely true, but as with anyone the longer you know them the more there is to discover about them. Jesus will return and we will still have questions to ask. Today I want us to know Him as the physical representation of God in the world. He was born, lived and died like any human, but the result of His death was to free us.

It’s not enough that we acknowledge Jesus or recognize Jesus or even allow that in some way Jesus might somehow actually be like God. Faith means we accept, we believe, and we confess Jesus as God. As the president of a Minneapolis seminary said, “Our problem is that we have absolutely no experience with divine-human beings other than Jesus Christ. He is absolutely unique, the only one of His kind.”

Maybe you’ve never looked at it that way before, but that statement really struck me as being quite logical. We don’t have any basis for dealing with divinity. We don’t carry the presence of God around with us in a tabernacle like the Hebrews did. We only know what we have been taught and what the Holy Spirit has revealed to us, and if we are receptive to the work of the Spirit, we should have an understanding of the divine.

Except that the one we believe in also had 206 bones, a set of internal organs, two eyes, two ears, a nose and a mouth like us. That may be the hardest thing for us to accept; not that He is God, that’s the part we cling to; but the fact that He is human gives us a reason to pause. We aren’t always that sure of ourselves; how much do we dare to trust in someone like us?

Mark’s gospel starts with Jesus already an adult, on the verge of His public ministry. Matthew and Luke start before He was born. John wasn’t so concerned that people understood how Jesus got here, but that He is God. He wanted his readers to know Jesus as a person with no end and no beginning, who always was and always will be. In order to establish Christ’s never-ending timeline, John started at the very beginning.

With the words in the beginning, John echoed the words of Genesis in images of creation. No other gospel writer was so bold as to begin in the beginning of all things and yet what better way to teach the Incarnation? John had to establish who he was dealing with; not a baby or a Galilean prophet, but the very creator of the universe. More incredibly, the God who chose to put Himself in our place.

The Word made flesh is the meaning of the Incarnation, but that is still a mystery to our logical minds. As one of my seminary professors wrote, “The Word did not merely attach a physical body

to Himself, like a puppeteer would slip a puppet over his hand.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus entered into the human experience in the most real way possible, but not only that. He also lived among us and came to offer Himself for our sake.

I think the Message Bible translation says it best, *“The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”* The word dwelt does not really do justice to what John was trying to say. The true meaning is tabernacle, as in the place where God’s glory and presence resided. Any Jewish reader would instantly recognize in John’s description the connection to the Old Testament history of the Israelites traveling with a tabernacle, setting up and taking it down wherever they went.

The tabernacle itself was actually a tent, and whenever Moses would go to the tent to meet with God, all the people would stand at the entrance of their tents and watch. God’s glory had to be contained within the tabernacle. As one author said, *“As the glory of God filled the tabernacle, so did the divine glory manifest itself in the person of Christ among us, and, as John said, we have seen it.”*<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said, *“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”* He wasn’t just being philosophical. Hebrews 1 gives us the inside story, *“In the past, God spoke through the prophets to our ancestors in many times and many ways. In these final days, though, he spoke to us through a Son. God made his Son the heir of everything and created the world through him. The Son is the light of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s being.”*

In the ancient world an imprint was the impression made by a stamp or a seal in wax. It carried as much credibility as the original. Jesus is the exact imprint of God’s being, with all the glory of God, yet contained in the form of a human body. God stamped His image on Jesus just as He stamped His image on us, yet Jesus remained sinless. That’s part of the mystery of the Incarnation and the power of His holiness.

It may be that we are hindered slightly by not living in the days when we could see Jesus face to face. I offer that as a possibility, not an excuse. Hebrews also makes it clear that faith must accept what it cannot see. John saw Jesus up close and personal, knew Him as a friend and teacher, and chose to describe Him in ways that the other gospel writers did not. Was John more impressed with Jesus than the others? That would be unlikely, but maybe his perception of Jesus was more a feeling of overwhelming glory than simply a friend and teacher.

We have observed His glory in ways that cannot be explained; those personal, holy, sacred and precious moments when nothing rational can suffice. The answered prayers, the healing, the blessings; those are what adopted children of God enjoy that no one else will know until they too become His.

Jesus is an expression of God’s mind to us. In the life of Jesus we can see and hear God’s love, God’s power, God’s compassion, God’s justice and God’s forgiveness. Jesus is the ultimate expression,

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<sup>1</sup>Dongell, Joseph, *John: A Commentary for Bible Students*, pg. 40

<sup>2</sup> *New Testament Commentary*, pg. 367

the clearest Word God could ever speak to us. He came to unfold the mind of God to us in terms that cannot be mistaken.

Two titles frequently used for Jesus are the Son of Man and the Son of God, the main difference being His relationship to those on earth and His relationship to His Father in heaven. Jesus used the term Son of Man for Himself most often and named Himself that way because through His incarnation He belongs to humankind, as one who in human nature has accomplished such great things for human nature, who makes real the ideal humanity.<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean that God experienced hunger, thirst, and pain, bled and died? What does it mean that He celebrated and laughed, or that He cried, or that He grew angry at injustice, or that He had compassion on those who were suffering? It means He understands us completely, even if we don't completely understand Him.

There is something in God that responds to something in us. Ecclesiastes says that God planted eternity into the hearts of humankind. Maybe that sense of eternity, that portion of God that we cannot touch, is what keeps us curious about the person of Jesus. Born through spiritual means, yet faced with human challenges, dying and being raised to live again, Jesus confounds our sense of reason, but we cannot turn away from Him.

We expect that when a child is born the journey to the grave simultaneously begins. If that sounds morbid, consider the verse that says "*It is appointed to all to die once.*" It's not so much the nature of things that concerns us but the reality that Christ was the only one born into the world for the purpose of dying. He did not pass from the world like a forgotten face but He returned to complete the work He began.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples it was through a locked door, and He showed them His wounds, perhaps as a sign of identity. Thomas, who missed it, also wanted visual confirmation. What was wrong with Thomas needing proof? On the one hand we too may require confirmation in order to believe. We want to touch, view or otherwise experience what we are called on to accept. True belief relies on faith. Jesus said this kind of faith carries a greater blessing. Whether with or without sight it is Jesus we see when we believe.

There were many who during Jesus' life on earth made physical contact. Lepers touched Him and He didn't object. Disciples broke bread with Him, prayed with Him, had their dusty feet cleaned by Him. Romans soldiers beat Him, spit on Him, and nailed Him down. They all put their hands on the one who made heaven and earth. They all had face to face contact with the one true God.

Can we touch God or is it simply God who touches us? What kind of encounter do we expect to have? We know Him as the savior who lives within us – the living Lord. We do not find Him in rocks or trees, but His signature we do see written across the earth and in the heavens. We hear His voice

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<sup>3</sup> Lockyer, Herbert, *All the Teachings of Jesus*, pg. 10

in our conscience and in our prayers. It can best be described as feeling Jesus, touching God and being touched by Him as we grow in relationship and in His likeness.

Colossians 1 is a hymn of the early church, sung by those who saw and those who didn't. It echoes John chapter 1 in describing the creation work of Christ, His preexistence, His rule over all things. But here is added the mention of His death as a way of gaining His place in God's kingdom, also the reconciliation He achieved. Peace was brokered through the blood of His cross.

Somewhere between our alienation from God and our reconciliation to Him there was a cross, and if our faith is to be valid it must have a cross at the heart of it. It was God's choice to use Christ in this way; it pleased God to do so. It's a sacrifice we still do not completely understand, but it is the truth of our faith. Everything hinges on our acceptance of this event. God did this in order to bring us before Him as holy and blameless people.

It can certainly be argued that we are not truly holy and we are rarely completely blameless, but this is God's depiction of us. This is what He wants us to be, what He wants us to aspire to be. He will uphold this image of us if we continue to stay firm in the faith of Christ, well grounded and settled and steadfast, not shifting or moving away from the hope of the gospel.

This is God's goal for us, and so we borrow from the holiness of Christ as we acquire our own. Through Christ we may remain blameless as His work of cancelling our debt can never be overturned. There is no denying that this passage gives us a clear vision of Christ beyond that tiny babe in the manger or the Savior dying on a cross. He is so much more to the world and He should be so much more to us. We celebrate His death and resurrection in the meal at His table; how much more intimate with Him could we get?

In the play *Green Pastures* the Lord is anxiously looking out over heaven, trying to decide what to do with the sinful situation on earth. Gabriel enters with his horn tucked under his arm. Sensing the Lord's dilemma, he asks, "Lord, has the time come for me to blow the trumpet?" "No, no," said the Lord, "don't touch the trumpet, not yet." God continues to worry with the problem.

Gabriel asks the Lord again what he plans to do. Will he send someone to tend to the situation? Who will it be? Gabriel makes some suggestions. "How about another David or Moses? You could send one of the prophets: Isaiah or Jeremiah. There are lots of great prophets up here. What do you think, Lord?" Without looking back at Gabriel, God said, "I am not going to send anyone. This time I am going myself!"<sup>4</sup>

Living in the awareness of the risen Jesus is not a trivial pursuit for the bored and lonely or a defense mechanism enabling us to cope with the stress and sorrow of life. It is the key that unlocks the door to grasping the meaning of existence. All day and every day we are being reshaped into the image of Christ. Everything that happens to us is designed to this end.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [http://day1.org/1187-a\\_permanent\\_glimpse\\_of\\_god](http://day1.org/1187-a_permanent_glimpse_of_god)

<sup>5</sup> Job, Reuben P., and Shawchuck, Norman, editors, *A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God*, pg. 180

Colossians 1:15-23  
John 1:1-5, 10, 14-18; 20:24-29

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