



Advent 1 - November 29, 2015  
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*Joy for Every Longing Heart:  
Can We Know God?  
Colossians 1:15*

This weekend marks the start of Advent, a time of anticipation as we wait for the Messiah to come and our sermon theme is going to shift. But I still want you to read chapter 12 of the Story this week. It's the second half of the David story... the heartbreaking half. Last week we met a vibrant young man who had the single quality most pleasing to God: a great heart! David's chief motivation was to please God. He lived in such faith that he knew he could do anything the Lord required of him. How many read about Goliath and the other accomplishments of young David?

But this week we discover the corrupting influence of power, even on someone as pure as David. We watch with horror as the man after God's own heart commits adultery with Bathsheba, gets her pregnant, and then plots to have her husband, faithful Uriah, killed to cover things up. It is David's darkest moment, and it is so sad, isn't it?

I want you to read chapter 12 this week—even though it will break your heart—because you are going to find yourself saying, "Wow, even David sinned... horribly. David, this great king with a great heart for God; I am so disappointed." I want you to read it because it will prepare you for the advent of the Great and Good King... the King who never disappoints, never fails, never falls.

You may not know this, but I used to fly airplanes. I learned when I was in Bakersfield. The first time you go up, it is amazing how small everything seems below you and how easy it is to get perspective on your place in the world from thousands of feet in the air. But the most exciting thing for me was flying the riverbed. I'd bring the plane down to a hundred feet above the dry Kern River and follow it along at very low altitude. And, yes it was stupid and illegal and dangerous... and pretty exciting. I'll tell you, when you were that low, every tree, every bush, every hill, every power line was suddenly very, very obvious.

Since September, we've been flying thousands of feet above the top of scripture. From this overview, we've looked at the scope and unity of God's Story. We are seeing how it all ties together. And as I've said many times, we are getting glimpses of "the Scarlet Thread," the appearances of Jesus throughout the whole Bible.

But for Advent, we are going to fly the riverbed. We are descending from thousands of feet up and we are going to skim along the surface for a nice, close look! We are going to dig in to one of the great Christological passages in the Bible: Colossians 1. No text paints Jesus in more brilliant colors than this one. We are calling this Advent series *Joy for Every Longing Heart* because this majestic text speaks to some of the deepest longings in human experience. Questions like, "Can we know God?" "What does the future hold?" "Does the church matter?" "Is God with us?" and "What hope do we have?" Great, deep questions, right? This weekend we begin with: "Can we know God?"

One of the most exciting things about our Sweetheart Church at this moment is the growth in the number of young families. We are booming in that demographic. Last Sunday Cyndi and I hosted a potluck with that group and talked about raising children spiritually. Afterward, we took questions. One woman raised her hand and said, "When we were on the way home after church last Sunday, my six-year-old said, 'There is no God.' How would you handle that?" I said, "Cyndi, why don't you answer that one." (She did great, by the way!)

Paul opens this great passage with an emphatic, "Yes! There is a God and you can know him!" Listen to this majestic portrayal of Jesus.

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. <sup>19</sup>For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup>and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Is there a God? If there is, can we know Him? Many religions would say, "No, God is unknowable." Leo Strauss, a German Jewish Philosopher from the last century, said, "God is unknowable. This is the fundamental premise of the Bible." A Hindu teacher named Yasya amatam taught, "You should know that God cannot be known." And a contemporary Muslim teacher put it even more succinctly: "God is utterly unknowable."

But in this text, the Apostle Paul dares to raise his hand and say, "Excuse me, but that's not true. Jesus is the image of the invisible God." You will recognize the Greek word for "image." It is "eikon" from which we get the word "icon." Eikon was used to describe the image on a coin. Eikon meant "imprint" or "stamp of authenticity" or "exact expression." To say that Jesus was the "eikon" of the invisible God was Paul's way of saying, "Jesus is the exact expression of God! "

And Paul wasn't saying that Jesus looked like God. Last Tuesday we had baby day for the staff. Three families have newborns: the Hackmans, the Palmers and the Whites. This was the coming-out party for their newest family members: Ezra White, Bennet Palmer and Reed Hackman. When Megan introduced Reed, she said, "He looks just like Larry." You know, I think I see it! Come to think of it, Ezra looks a lot like his dad, too, don't you think?

"He is the spitting image of his dad!" You've probably heard someone say that before. But when Paul writes that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God," he is saying much more than that. Paul is saying that when we look at Jesus, we are looking at God! Not just a messenger from God, not a junior member of the deity... when we see Jesus, we see God.

I want you to understand something: this is the most audacious claim of the Christian faith. Jews find it blasphemous. So do Muslims. Hindus find it ridiculous. But it was what Paul asserted, it is what orthodox Christians have believed for 2,000 years and we do so because of what Jesus taught and did. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one. If you see me, you have seen the Father." And he performed acts of creation and dominion over creation. He turned water into wine, multiplied fish and loaves, ordered the weather to obey him and raised dead people to life... including himself! Only God the Creator can do such things. If these stories are not true, then the claims about the divinity of Jesus are fraudulent.

But if they are true, then the greatest, most audacious claim of Christmas—of Advent—rings out from Paul's writings: In Jesus, God has revealed himself perfectly. In Jesus, God has come to visit his people.

To the six-year-old doubter—and the 76-year-old doubter who says, "Why doesn't God show himself?" Paul says, "Uh, who do you think Jesus is? He is the image—the eikon—of the invisible God." This is essential. For one thing, too many people who claim to be Christians have an entirely inadequate view of Jesus. He's a good guy, a great teacher, a miracle-worker, a healer, a prophet. All those things are true, of course, but they are not enough because they seek to define Jesus by his activities.

Paul teaches that Jesus is more than the things he does. Jesus is God in the flesh. When someone complains to you that God is hidden or distant, your first response should be, "No, he's not. He came to earth in human form. His name is Jesus. If you want to see God, God is there to be seen in Jesus!" If you want to know who God is, if you want to know God's heart... behold Jesus. He is the God of compassion who touches the leper, who welcomes the prostitutes, who dines with the tax collector. He is the God of love who will not abandon his broken children. He is the God of grace who offers the forgiveness we do not deserve at the price of his own suffering and death. Do you want to know God? Behold Jesus!

"He is the eikon of the invisible God." The first thing we learn from these eight words is that when we see Jesus, we see God... but dig deeper. We also learn that

God wants us to know Him. He wants to reveal himself to us. How many of you remember watching *Wizard of Oz* as you were growing up? Do they still run that show every year? It scared the heck out of me. The flying monkeys freaked me out. The finale comes when Dorothy and her friends discover that the great and awesome wizard of Oz is, in fact, a phony... a special-effects artist. Do you remember his words of desperation when the truth was about to be revealed? "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!"

Most of the religions of the world treat God like the Wizard of Oz... hidden, distant, manipulative. But the God of the Bible we discover to be very different. He longs to have a relationship with his creation; longs to reveal himself to us. He always has. Remember how God walked with Adam and Even in the Garden? And after they ate the forbidden fruit and tried to hide in shame, what does he call out? "Where are you?" And in Ur, God reaches out to an old pagan named Abram, "I will be your God and you will be my man, and I will make of you a great nation through whom I bless the world." And when Moses asked God's name on Sinai, God didn't hesitate. "My name is Yahweh. Go tell Pharaoh that!"

The Bible is the story of a God who wants to be known... who wants to reveal himself to his children. The coming of Jesus to the earth wasn't plan Z... after every other idea had failed. The revelation of Jesus—the eikon of the invisible God—was the culmination of God's plan all along... to reveal himself to his children.

But why should this matter to us other than being interesting? Because right now there are people sitting here, going through hard things, praying their hearts out, crying their eyes out and feeling like God is a no-show... that he is hiding or toying with them or something. And you wonder, "Does God really care about my pain? Does God really understand what I'm going through? What proof do you have that I matter to God?"

And Paul points to Jesus and says, "Here's your proof. He is the eikon of the invisible God. His coming to earth and living and suffering and dying for you is the ultimate declaration that God cares, that he understands, that you matter to him." When you cry out to God, you are crying out to Jesus. When you bewail your pain, your isolation, your betrayal, your abandonment, your fear... you are doing so to the God who took all of that upon himself! Can we know God? Yes, in Jesus we know God—a God who longs to reveal himself to us.

But there's another reason this verse matters. Do you know the first time the word "eikon" appears? It is in the Greek version of the Old Testament—way back in Genesis chapter 1:26. God said, "Let us make man in our own eikon." If Jesus is the eikon of the invisible God and if we are made in his eikon, his image, then when we look at Jesus, we see what we were created to be.

On the Greek temple in Delphi, a carving was discovered, one you are probably familiar with: "Know thyself." "Know thyself," the ancient philosophers said. "All

true knowledge begins there.” Well, when we look at Jesus—what he did, how he lived, how he loved, how he suffered, how he prevailed—we are looking at what we were created to be before sin marred and scarred us. Do you want to know thyself as God intended you to be? Look at Jesus.

We don't come to church just to learn about God—although we do learn. We don't even come to church just to be saved from our sins—although we are saved. We come to church, we go to LifeGroup, we are part of God's family, in order to become more like Jesus... in order that our eikon might be conformed through the Holy Spirit into the eikon of Jesus. And the reason we do that is so that we can bless the rest of the world that does not know God. You may be the only gospel some people ever read. You may be the only image of God that some people will ever see. That's how much is at stake!

If you don't want to become more like Jesus, then you are just playing at religion. You are a poser. But if you long to have the marred and scarred image of God within you become more and more as God intended it to be—so that the world might see through you that God is real—then the only place to start is by beholding Jesus Christ. “He is the eikon of the invisible God...”