

## "THE MOST SURPRISING TURN OF OUR SURPRISING GOD"

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Do you ever have problems convincing others you are legit because they fail to see you for who you truly are? They can only see on the surface of things? Mothers, teachers, accountants, businesspeople, artists—it has happened to everyone here at some point.

As a 29 year old arriving as senior pastor in a downtown Gothic church, I ascended the stairs to the gallery where the organist was wailing away on their mammoth pipe organ. “Hello, Dene, I am the new pastor,” I extended my hand. He responded, “Oh my God, we are going to have to burp you.” I was too young... As a 57 year old ministerial candidate here, I gave my trial sermon and then answered questions afterward. Does anyone recall this? I do. One young man—I don’t recall who—looked skeptically at me and said, “Um. What’s your thinking about retirement?” I quipped, “I hear Costa Rica is pretty nice. Do you know any good places? I haven’t thought much about it.” For him I was too old.

Interviewing for my ministry on Cape Cod, I drove to that church in a sports car. I drive a sports car now. I drove one when I was 16. They did eventually call me. But a member of the Search Committee could not see having a pastor tooling around in a 350Z...Don’t get me started on the stories women pastors share with me. It’s much tougher for them. Some call this a problem with *optics*. Then again, if we think we have problems, imagine presenting yourself as the Messiah, the Son of God, to use the words Mark used today.

Imagine trying to show people you’re the visible image of the invisible God. (Col. 1.15) I can already hear the words. “You don’t look like the visible image of the invisible God. You look like a Jewish carpenter from Nazareth.” I wonder how often Jesus was tempted to smile and ask, “So what is the visible image of the invisible God supposed to look like?” Jesus never asked that because he already knew what he’d hear in turn. “Not like you.”

Americans have more problems with optics than most people and cultures in the world. We do because we have been programmed into the Western intellectual bias that we can naturally think clearly about anything. Even matters of mystery, totally inaccessible to us. We believe that we have everything we innately require to think clearly and truthfully about whatever we choose. Our democratic sensibilities interfere with our spiritual selves. And the reason I say that is because some things, things which are of God, can only be known or understood or believed because God chooses to reveal those truths to us. The very idea of that cuts against our democratic and egalitarian grain as American citizens.

All of this is a good entry point into Advent. Because in this season we prepare for the Messiah born to us, at once fully human and fully divine. Jesus’ humanity is easier for us. His very human story, born to a poor, fugitive couple endears and attracts us. But soon he grew to manhood. It became clear to those seeing to the heart of the spiritual matter that he was different than others around him. Utterly different, as God’s Son and Mediator and Prophet and Healer and Christ to put the world right at a time things were terribly wrong.

Our problem as humankind was and is that we have expectations as to how God ought to look and act for this God to be considered worthy of our worship. From the first, Jesus failed to measure up to our expectations of God. For example, the OT speaks of how fearful and devastating it is for mere mortals like us to gaze upon God. It is as painful and dangerous as gazing directly into the sun. For example, if we took a poll back then, nine out of ten Near Easterners in Jesus' day assumed God's primary attributes were unrestrained power and undeniable glory. Not much power and glory—as the world counts it—in a crucified rabbi, is there now? But God did choose to reveal himself to some of them. From the visit of the angel Gabriel to young Mary to the resurrection appearances after that dark Friday, those who saw through eyes of faith came to see who Jesus truly was.

People asked then what people still ask today: why wasn't Jesus' divinity more obvious? Maybe the issue isn't assessing Jesus with intellectual powers of observing and knowing. Maybe the issue is how open-minded and open-hearted we are in allowing the Holy Spirit to have its way with us, pushing us to see more of God than we ever imagined was there.

I mean, if God is much more than infinite power and dramatic glory; if he is also sacrificial suffering and redeeming love on our behalf; if God yearns for and will not abandon his creatures, then it is easy to see Jesus as the image of God. If Almighty God has this tender side, yearning to reconcile us and to reunite us with him, then it makes all the sense in the world for God to personalize this message by taking our human flesh on himself, and coming as a lowly servant to heal, teach, forgive, suffer, die and rise again. In this light, the incarnation—God taking our flesh on himself—makes all the sense in the world.

This teaching—the incarnation—is a great mystery of our faith. Contrary to our intellectual bias, you don't understand mysteries, except in glimpses, as God allows. Rather than *understand* mysteries, we *stand under* them, letting their goodness wrap us until we notice our outlook has entirely changed, and our way of life has shifted also. Mysteries of God are holy gifts of grace that we bask within. They have their way with us, not us with them.

By the way, Christianity alone makes this contention: that the infinite descended, taking the form of our finite and fragile limitations within human flesh. The implication is clear. We weren't doing well trying to reach up to God with our proud, haughty Towers of Babel. So the God whom we could not reach elected to descend to know us and our struggles. When we could not avail ourselves of God, God came down to us to become available.

The incarnation reminds us, counter to most modern "spiritualities", this is a very specific God doing a very unique thing. And if we wish to dwell in the light of this holy mystery, how it dignifies all humanity and honors us individually, we are not free to invent any old god who seems fashionable here and now or seems to meet what we consider our need.

John the Baptizer saw this in advance of others. His prophetic powers were strong. His message to repent wasn't bad news about how worthless and headed for hell we are. His message to repent was good news about cleaning up our act because God was giving an incomparable gift for which we could never be worthy. But let us at least give it our best.

In Jesus Christ, it was almost as though God was saying, "Humanity, you want a true

image of me? You want the secret of who I really am and what I am really up to? Then I give you a true icon—a real window unto myself—Jesus the Christ. Listen to him rather than attempting to craft your own images of me, images to which I give the name “idol.”

Much of Advent is about listening carefully to what God is up to. Will you listen with me? Amen.