

The Visible Face of God

Colossians 1:15-20

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (NRSV)

I

For a lot of people today, God seems invisible. You may know that the number of so-called “nones” is on the rise in North America. “Nones” include atheists, agnostics, and others who mark the option “none” when asked what their religion is. One recent poll by the Pew Forum discovered that nones now make up 20% of the American population, up from 15% of the population in 2007.¹ That’s one in five Americans who claim no religious affiliation.

If you keep your ears open, you’ll hear anecdotal evidence beyond these numbers that even some people who appear to be Christian have grave doubts that God exists. Maybe you’ve met people—or maybe you yourself are one—who attend church, try to live moral lives, and give generously of their time and money, but who are not at all sure the universe contains a God. Did you know even some pastors fit this description? Some pastors apparently nurse deep inner conflicts about the existence of God. Strange, isn’t it? I don’t personally know any such pastors, nor am I among them. But a website called The Clergy Project claims they have as members 515 active and former clergy who do not hold supernatural beliefs.²

Surely many reasons unhitch people from religious faith. One reason may be God’s invisibility. Most of our culture trades on things we can see, touch, taste, and feel. Thousands of concrete objects surround us during the day, from our beds and

food, to our cars and trucks, to our smart phones and computers. We believe i-Phones exist because we can see them with our eyes, caress them in our hands, and hear the voice of Siri crooning at us. Given all this sensory data about i-Phones, you'd have to hunt a long time in our culture to find anyone who doubts the existence of i-Phones.

So let us face up to the fact that in our time belief in God comes hard. God is a very different reality than i-Phones. As one of the nones might phrase it, "I can't see God, hear God, touch God, taste God, or smell God. So how am I to believe, when this God who supposedly exists is so unsensory and therefore so seemingly remote? I cannot see, hear, touch, taste, or smell God. How am I supposed to know God?

II

The doubters have a point—sort of. For a long time, God was invisible. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel and their kin believed God worked on their behalf and summoned them to fidelity. The matriarchs and patriarchs of Israel believed in God, but they could not see God. They trusted God but did not know what God looked like. God was invisible.

Sure—sometimes God assigned messengers—also known as angels—to talk to them face-to-face, as when three angels visited Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18), or when an angel wrestled with Jacob at Peniel (Gen. 32). But seeing a messenger of God is not the same as seeing God's very self. God could and did send messengers, but God remained invisible.

God wanted it that way. In the second of the Ten Commandments, God specifically said (according to the old King James Version) that the Israelites should not make any "graven images." The Israelites interpreted this to mean they should not craft any image of God. They should not paint pictures of God; they

should not carve statues of God; and they should not cast metal effigies of God. God wished to remain invisible.

To be sure, occasionally the Israelites pushed back and tried to find a way of seeing God face-to-face. Moses, for example. In Exodus 33 Moses tried to see God. Maybe Moses figured he had some leverage with God, that God owed him a special favor. After all, Moses had performed outstanding service to God. He had gone back to Egypt and done the dirty work of contending against Pharaoh. Moses had led the Israelites during their strenuous journey into a hot, dry, and foodless wilderness. From frustrated, petulant Israelites, Moses had endured complaining, stubbornness, and conflict. Maybe Moses thought God owed him a reward for meritorious service.

Whatever the reason, Moses wanted to see God's face. "Show me your glory, I pray," asks Moses. I want to see you full throttle, in all your glory and splendor. I want to see just how majestic you are. Show me. Reveal to me the fullness of your divinity.

God refused. The best I can do for you, God told Moses, is to show you the backside of my glory. You can't see the front side, because that much glory would kill you. Seeing my face is not permitted. It's too much for any human mortal to endure (33:17-23).

That's how things stood for something like 1,800 years. No one saw God face-to-face. No one know what God looked like. God stayed invisible and imperceptible. Yes, God gave laws to reform Israelite society and sent a long succession of prophets to poke Israel to care for the poor, the widows and orphans, and the immigrants. Nevertheless, God remained invisible.

III

Until Jesus.

It took people a while to figure out what was going on in the person of Jesus, but once they figured it out, they were astonished.

This was God! To word it another way, this Jesus was the face of God. For nearly 2,000 years they had not dreamed such a thing could happen. For two millennia majority theological opinion assumed no human being could ever see the face of God in this life and live to tell about it. But now we can see God in Jesus! How astonishing! How delightful!

An array of texts in the New Testament push out this realization that Jesus is the face of God. One is today's text from Colossians. "Christ is the image of the invisible God," says verse 15. That is, Christ visibly expresses the God who has heretofore been invisible. In a newly visible way, Christ reveals the God who has been partially hidden for a long time. Verse 19 takes this one step further: "in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Which means in Jesus, nothing of God is held back. Jesus shows the full package of God. Not one thing is left out. All of God is in Jesus. If you see Jesus, then you see God. Period.

At least two other passages in the New Testament travel a similar path. The first is 2 Corinthians 3:18. Here Paul assures us that Christ pulls aside the veil that so far has prevented us from seeing the glory of God. Imagine a curtain hanging in front of our eyes. Well, Jesus pulls the curtain back so we can now see the glory of God without hindrance.

A second text is the opening section of the gospel of John. This poem likens Jesus to the Word and Wisdom of God, which takes flesh and lives among us. The poem infers that because Jesus sees God, and we see Jesus, we have a sightline for seeing God. To put it another way, God shows all of God's self to Jesus and Jesus shows all of himself to us. So when we see Jesus, we also see God shining through Jesus. Jesus is like a lens through which we see God.

IV

God may seem invisible to many people in our time. But not when you look at Jesus. Thanks especially to the four gospels, we have stories about and sayings from the historical Jesus. In these stories and sayings we know quite a bit about the sort of person Jesus was. We see in these stories the compassion of Jesus for lower-class marginal people. We see a life of neighborliness toward people of different races. We see in him a spirit of generosity. We see a life of peacemaking and justice. And in all of that, we also see God.

It's worth noting that what we see in Jesus sharply critiques a fair bit of American culture. The compassion of Jesus critiques the meanness toward lower-class, marginal people that infects part of American culture. The neighborliness of Jesus with people of different races critiques the racism woven in American culture and attitudes. His spirit of generosity critiques the spirit of selfishness hovering through America. His pursuit of peace critiques the American pursuit of violence.

I do not for a moment believe that pointing people to Jesus will dry up the unbelief of our era. In some eras of history people found it easy to believe in God, but that's not the zeitgeist of our era. When faith comes in our era, it often comes hard, with no small amount of struggle.

Yet I do believe that pointing people to Jesus is the best option for helping people see God. If people can take a long, loving look at Jesus, they may still have a hard time with God. So be it. Still, if they can at least see Jesus and take him seriously, much will be accomplished. For he is the very image of God—and in him dwells the fullness of God.

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

² <http://www.clergyproject.org/>