

“Seeing God through Jesus”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
October 7, 2018

Hebrews 1:1-3, 2:8-13

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

The problem with God is that we can't see God. Can't hear God. Can't touch God. At least not directly, not in any conventional sense of those words. And yes, we know that is where faith comes in. “Faith,” the author of Hebrews tells us, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). That's all well and good, but sometimes it sure would be nice if God showed up—showed up like Morgan Freeman in *Bruce Almighty*. Or Morgan Freeman in *Evan Almighty*. Or, really, just having Morgan Freeman show up might be enough.

There are undoubtedly good reasons for why we cannot see God. God transcends material reality. The mystery and majesty of the divine—of that perfection, that beauty, that love and goodness from which we spring—are impossible to comprehend.

If we were to see God directly, we would be obligated to mirror that perfect, selfless, universal love. And who is prepared to live like that? It is for this reason that God tells Moses on Mount Sinai that no one can see God and live (Exodus 33:20). It is why the evangelist John says, “No one has ever seen God” (1:18). This mystery keeps us humble, and listening, and in awe.

But it is not enough—not in the hospital bed, or the moment of doubt, or even daily life, especially right now. It is not enough when we face the death that seems inescapable, or the sin that seems unforgivable, or the life that is spinning out of control, or the world that is still full of hate and injustice. It's in those moments that we need something we can hold onto. Something we can see, and touch.

When I skinned my knee as a kid, or came home crying because of bullies, it wasn't mystery that I needed, it wasn't some cosmic idea of parenthood; I needed *my* mom, *my* dad. It was their words, their bodies, their laughs and tears, that saved me.

What was true for them is true for our Father and Mother in heaven.

God had tried for so long to reach us through prophets, through laws and ideas, and still it was not enough. And so God did something remarkable. God *came* to us. God poured all of God's love, and truth, into the person of Jesus Christ—a man who could touch us, walk with us, talk to us, even die for us. A man of earth and heaven, a God who cried, a God who laughed, a God we could see.

That is the good news Hebrews and the Gospel have for us today: if we cannot see God, we *can* see Jesus. And through Jesus, we learn about the character of God.

Colossians 1:15 proclaims, “The Son is the image of the invisible God.”

This is the meaning of the incarnation—that in Jesus we see God.

And here's what we see. Alan Brehm writes, "We see him embracing the ones nobody else would embrace. We see him confronting the religious people with the falseness of their self-righteousness. We see him forgiving sinners and restoring people to their right mind." I'd add: We see him weeping at the death of his friend Lazarus. We see him praying, even from the cross, for those who have hurt him. We see him overturning tables, feeding the hungry, and refusing the sword. We see him standing between a woman and those who would stone her, assault her. We see him tearing off the roof in order to get into the house of a sick man, and busting down locked doors in order to reach a people afraid.

We see a God who loves us, who gives everything—even his own life—to free us.

In the TV show "The West Wing," Leo tells Josh a story that to me sums up the God we see in Jesus. He says:

This guy's walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out.

A doctor passes by, and the guy shouts up, "Hey you! Can you help me out?" The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole, and moves on.

Then a priest comes along, and the guy shouts up, "Father, I'm down in this hole. Can you help me out?" The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole, and moves on.

Then a friend walks by. "Hey Joe, it's me! Can you help me out?" And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, "Are you stupid? Now we're both down here." The friend says, "Yes, but I've been down here before, and I know the way out."

Of course, that story isn't quite as effective in a time of social distancing! Nevertheless, the God we see in Jesus is a friend. He's a God who jumps down into whatever hole we're in and leads us out. We need that God right now, because a lot of us, we're feeling like someone dumped us in a hole and just left us.

We can see this God today, right now, right here. It begins with these stories, these old, strange stories passed down to us from generation to generation and shaped into Scripture. These stories that your grandparents told you. These stories that we tell every Sunday in the Children's Worship Center. Not just words on a page, but living stories of a living Christ who still walks beside lake shores, fishing for men and women, who still welcomes children into his arms, still teaches his sermons from the mount, still speaks with woman-prophets at the well, still walks among the fearful showing his wounds of love and saying, "Peace."

But maybe you have a hard time seeing even him.

There's an old legend in the Jewish Talmud, related by Henri Nouwen:

Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeron ben Yohai's cave... He asked Elijah, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah replied, "Go and ask him yourself." "Where is he?" "Sitting at the gates of the city." "How shall I know him?" "He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds."

Friends, he sits there still. Matthew 25 tells us that any time you want to see Jesus, you can find him sleeping on the street, or lying on a gurney in the ER, or slumped over in a nursing home, or locked behind bars at Auburn Correctional.

And I'll tell you a secret: he's there with you right now.

Jesus said that he would remain with us, and that we would be his body, vines to his branches. He said that, through him, we shall all be called sons and daughters of God. That was his mission: to wake us up to God, not only in him, but in us as well—certainly not as clear a reflection, not an “exact imprint,” but an image nonetheless, an image of God. An image covered in the dirt of selfishness and prejudice, sin and pride, distraction and violence. An image we had all but forgotten, until Jesus wiped away the dirt. And now, because of him, we can see God in each other wherever there is love, or forgiveness, or the work of justice, or the joy of life, or the ecstasy of creation.

Once, long ago, Jesus helped a frightened people see God in a Samaritan woman, in fishermen caked in mud, in tax collectors who climb trees, in Roman centurions and women about to be stoned, in criminals crucified and widows who give their last coin, in blind and deaf men who see and hear what others cannot.

God isn't distant, Jesus said. God isn't abstract. God doesn't social distance (even though you should!). God is here. God is now.

If you wish to see God, take a look at your neighbor. Seek out someone hurting. Lend your life to one moment of love. Look deep within yourself. Then, you will see God. **Amen.**