

“Seeing God real”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
December 18, 2016

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

In just seven days, we will gather again around Christmas trees, drink hot cocoa, and open brightly colored presents. The baby Jesus will appear in nativity sets, and we’ll finally get to leave behind those sluggish Advent hymns and sing our favorite Christmas carols.

God will enter our lives again. Hope will appear on the horizon, and Mary’s Magnificat will become our reality—if we let it. Humility and compassion will supplant power and domination as the foundation of our lives together.

Are we ready?

The residents of Davidson, North Carolina, sure weren’t.

When St. Alban’s Episcopal Church installed a statue of Jesus depicted as a homeless man sleeping on a park bench in front of its church in the affluent suburban area, one woman called the cops, worried that an actual homeless person has gotten into their community.

That’s right. She called the cops on Jesus.

To be fair, it’s hard to know that the statue is Jesus. And that’s sort of the point. The statue shows a person huddled under a blanket, which completely covers his face. The holes in his uncovered feet, from where they nailed him to the cross, are the only sign of his identity.

Neighbors weren’t happy. One man wrote a letter to the local newspaper about how the statue “creeped” him out. Others voiced concern that the statue was an offense to God and to their community. That’s not *my* Jesus, they said; my savior isn’t a hobo.

Well, first of all, he’s not *your* Jesus. Secondly, maybe you’ve got the wrong Jesus.

Ray Bradbury writes in his seminal dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451*, “I often wonder if God recognizes His own son the way we’ve dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He’s a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar-crystal and saccharine.”

The statue was an honest depiction of the itinerant preacher who, in Matthew 25, says that he *is* the homeless man on the street, or the sick person in the hospital, or the hungry woman in line at the soup kitchen, or the man in prison: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me” (25:40).

But when Jesus showed up, the residents of Davidson didn't recognize him... and frankly, they didn't want to.

Do we?

Maybe we resist seeing God real because we prefer the security of our more comfortable versions of God.

We've taken this complex divine tapestry—proclaimed to us, embodied for us, in the person of Jesus Christ—and shrunk it down, cut off the corners we don't like, pulled out the threads we don't understand, and turned an intricate quilt into a wash cloth, a dinner napkin. Something palatable and easy. Something, maybe, that looks like us and not like other people. This god doesn't overturn tables, or sleep on park benches, or get angry, or make love, or cry, or love our enemies. This god confirms us in every way and never challenges.

That's exactly the kind of god Ahaz (AA h-ae-z) in our Isaiah passage wants. And he sure isn't going to let any sign mess that up.

A powerful army has formed against the southern kingdom of Judah, ruled by Ahaz. God's people are scared. Isaiah writes, "The heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind."

God sends the prophet Isaiah to comfort Ahaz and tell him not to be afraid. God is with him, and God will keep him safe. God even offers a sign of Ahaz's choosing: "Ask a sign of God; it can be deep as the bowels of the earth or high as heaven." Ask, and you, Ahaz, shall receive God's power.

Shockingly, Ahaz refuses.

At first, it seems like Ahaz gets it right. According to the Law (one that will later be cited by Jesus himself), we are not supposed to test God. Yet, there is no applause for Ahaz.

What appears to be a pious answer is actually an evasion.

You see, Ahaz has already found a solution to his problem. He has pledged himself to the Assyrian king, making Judah, the promised land that is supposed to belong to God alone, Assyria's vassal. He has called upon the king of Assyria to rescue him, and with this pledge of loyalty he has sent gold and silver, which he has stripped from God's temple. There, in the holy temple, he has built an altar for the Assyrian king. Ahaz, it would seem, has found a god more to his liking—a warrior king with an army at his command, a far more practical and tangible source of confidence.

To this, God could have said, “Fine, see how far that god gets you.” And perhaps our small gods would have said just that. But that is not the response of the God who dwells within the homeless man sleeping outside. Isaiah tells Ahaz that he will receive a sign anyway. This sign shall be a child, born to a young woman, and he shall be named Immanuel, meaning “God with us.”

What a stark contrast between the king of Assyria and this Immanuel: a vulnerable God who appears as a sign of peace, for newborn infants did not typically survive at that time during besiegement and war. God’s sign isn’t an army; it’s a baby, a green shoot, a blooming desert, a mountain dream.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew believes that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy. In Matthew’s story, an angel appears, just as Isaiah once did for Ahaz, and tells Joseph not to be afraid. The angel describes a Messiah, but not the great warrior king everyone was waiting for. No, this Messiah shall be a child, vulnerable and precious. This child will save people from their sins. He shall be a teacher and a carpenter. He shall walk with the homeless, and the sick, and the outcast, and the enemy. And they will call him Jesus.

He will be complicated. He will speak in mysterious parables and sayings. He will sometimes contradict himself. He will be perfect, and yet paradoxically others will make him stronger, better—his mother who, in the Gospel of John, invites the first sign of his divinity, water into wine; also, the Syrophenician woman who challenges him to grow beyond his ethnocentrism. He will be a man of peace, yet no stranger to rage and protest. He will be absolutely human and yet absolutely divine.

People will try to confine him by their expectations. Eventually, they will even crucify him. Their mistake won’t be that they failed to understand him; it will be that they thought they did. They thought they had him all figured out.

The good news is that their mistake couldn’t stop Easter from coming. And the good news is that, even if we look the other way as Ahaz did, even if we cling to our small versions of god, even if we don’t feel the Christmas spirit this year, God’s still showing up. There’s no mistake we can make that will stop Christmas from happening. The baby Jesus will be in that manger Christmas morning as surely as the sun will rise.

This Christmas, God offers to reveal God’s self to us again, not as we think God should be, but as God is. And we have a chance to do what Ahaz failed to do: to kneel, to trust, to accept the sign, to stand in awe of a God we cannot expect, cannot fathom, cannot box in, cannot reduce to our agendas and desires, our politics and theologies, even our religion. We have a chance to hold in our arms this fragile God, who somehow contains universes within a child, justice within a prisoner, freedom within a slave, peace within an abuse victim, love within an enemy, hope and home within a homeless man.

The community of Davidson may not have deserved that statue, but they got it anyway, a sign of God real. And since its debut, that statue has drawn supporters, including Pope Francis himself. People now sit on the bench beside Jesus, lying there, so cold, and place their hand on his bronze feet, and pray.

Sometime in the next week, God's going to show up in your life. It's not going to be where, or in whom, you expect. It might not be what you want. It might challenge everything you believe true. But God's going to give you a sign. You can call the cops if you want, but I hope you'll take the opportunity to look. You might just see God real. **Amen.**