

God's Picture

John 1:10-18

An old story has it that a little boy was feeling very lonesome for his father. His dad was away from home on business a great deal, and as much as they might have wished it otherwise, there were special family times when it was not possible to be together. One of those times was the boy's birthday — the father was simply not able to break away from a business trip out of town. Of course, he had sent a card and a lovely present. He had even called to wish his boy the best of the day, but that was no substitute for being there. Near the end of the evening, the son looked at the picture of his father that sat on the mantel piece, and said wistfully to his mother, "I wish Dad could step out of that picture."

A poignant scene ... a very human scene. But it is certainly not limited to little boys who miss their dads. In a very real way, that young lad expressed the deepest hope of the deepest souls who lived before the first Christmas. They longed for a God who would "step out of that picture." They wanted a God they could hang on to.

They believed in God, of course — the ancient Egyptians, the finest of the Greeks and Romans, the Eastern sages, and of course the Hebrew prophets. They knew there was a God and even had a sense of what God was like. They believed God had made the world. They believed God could be seen in nature. They believed that God controlled the events of history. In many ways, it was as if they did have a picture of God, a good enough picture to allow the most daring of them to call this great creator of the universe "Father." They got as high as that, but try as they might, they could not go farther ... and they knew it. The wish was to see God and know God and understand God's ways. The wish was for the creator to step out of that picture.

Then, one day, it happened. God did step out ... in Bethlehem. The scripture records it: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ... full of grace and truth ... No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, has made Godself known" (John 1:14, 18). The picture had suddenly come alive.

What makes Christianity different from all the other world religions is that, at its heart, it is not a religion of values and principles and do's-and-don'ts. It is a religion of happenings, of events, of plain historical occurrences. The heart of the gospel is not rules and regulations or even high ideals, but that God came to us in human flesh on a certain day, at a certain place, and in a certain hour; God lived and died among us, and afterward rose again from the dead. It is history. Christianity carries certain facts at its heart, and the greatest of them is this: "and the Word" ... the idea, the picture ... "became flesh, and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). That is what makes Christianity different: it gives provides answers to some of our deepest questions — questions about the world, questions about the nature of God, and even questions about ourselves.

Look at the world. If we read the paper or listen to the newscasts, we become very discouraged. Even the natural world is not all that pretty. Bunny rabbits are cute and cuddly. But those who know about these things tell us that rabbits stake out territories for themselves and if another rabbit should venture in by accident, that rabbit can be torn limb from limb, just for crossing the imaginary line. It is in the nature of the rabbit. Think of the soldier ants of South America that travel about in millions, each nearly an inch long with enormous pincer jaws to pull their victims apart, pouring a tarlike substance over every living thing in their path. Think what a little fish like a piranha will do to any flesh it can grab. It is not a pretty world, try as we may to think of it as such.

Frankly, at times it does not look as if it is God's world at all. Even though God created the world, it sometimes seems as if the almighty has left it and gone on vacation somewhere, or even worse, is not "almighty" and has been excluded from it by some awful enemy. When we look at the picture as it really is, we can hardly draw any other conclusion.

The message of Christianity, the message that the angels brought to the skies over Bethlehem is that, despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite whatever seems to contradict it, this is still God's world. God cares about it enough to take a remarkable step and enter its course of history in a way undreamed of by any of the faithful of generations before. It is a rebellious world, to be sure, but it still belongs to God, and it means something to God. That historic event in Palestine proves that God is not content to ignore the world and let it keep spinning off on its own sinful way. The

words of the Savior born that Christmas night, the one who lived a life that sin could not touch, come echoing back: "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 RSV).

This great event tells us something more than just the nature of the world; it tells us of the true nature of the God who created it. You see, the awful thing about studying the world and noting all the things that are wrong with it is that it finally arouses thoughts about the character of God. As Archibald MacLeish wrote in J.B., "If God is GOOD, He is not God; if God is GOD, He is not good."^[1] We can draw some terrible inferences by what we see.

Our faith answers that. Our faith says that this Jesus, the one whom all intelligent people admire and whom even unbelievers' credit with having lived a magnificent life, was God, the one who created all this: "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (John 1:3). That magnificent life of his, the love and care and concern, were, as scripture says, "the image" — the picture — "of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). If we want to know about God's character, if we want God to step out of that picture on the ancient mantel piece, all we need do is look at the character of Jesus. Christmas gives us that chance.

The truth about the world, the truth about God — that is what the coming of Christ brings. But it brings one thing more — the truth about us.

You have heard it said, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." Well, the coming of Christ says that is not true. Yes, we are probably best fitted in our natural selves to be rolling around in some sort of moral mud, but Jesus comes and puts his hand on our shoulder and says, "You don't belong to the pigsty; you belong to me." Then he stoops over and lifts us from the dirt and tells us that he left his eternal home, he was willing to go through all the things we go through and do it perfectly to show us that it can indeed be done, and then stretched himself on that cross at last to rescue us from the butcher.

Is that the truth about me? About you? Were we that important to God for God to become flesh and dwell among us and then to die? If that is the truth, then no one can ever call us worthless. Christ affirms it to us as Christ makes us "new creatures," silk purses — flawed in this life unquestionably — but prepared someday to join God in the world without end.

Yes, Christmas brings us truth — truth about our world, truth about our God, and truth about ourselves. And we have that truth because God has "stepped out of the picture." "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ... full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), and we are glad. Amen.