

THE IMAGE OF GOD SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS EVE

What does God look like? Will you recognize God? Will you know God when you see God?

Centuries before Jesus' birth, the ancient prophets spoke of the coming of God through a Messiah, a deliverer. One prophet, Isaiah, described him as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

But Isaiah warned that this Messiah would also know suffering and rejection because his mission would clearly prioritize the poor and the marginalized.

Some were expecting a Messiah who would be a political revolutionary who would revive the glory days of King David. Others visualized the coming Messiah as one who would represent the Greek idea of focusing totally on the afterlife.

Again, my question for you: What does God look like? What is your image of God? I think the image of God is an important question to ask because we make our image of God but, more importantly, our image of God makes us.

Who is God to you? A God who favors some over others or a God who loves all creation and all people? Do you picture a savior concerned only with saving people for life after death or one who is actively engaged in restoring and renewing things right now?

Do you believe that God rewards obedience with material wealth and physical health or that God remains present with us, even in

poverty, pain and suffering. Again, what do you expect God to be?

Jesus was not what most folks expected. When we think about God, adjectives like powerful, majestic and almighty come to mind. But Jesus did not come to the earth with any air of wealth or power.

On the contrary, everything about Jesus' life is in stark contrast to the values of the world.

Jesus arrived on the scene not in strength but in vulnerable weakness, a cold shivering baby away in a manger, no crib for his bed.

He was born a dark-skinned Palestinian Jew, into a community of marginalized, oppressed people, spending his early years as a refugee in Africa to escape political genocide. His formative years were lived in a nondescript village, a member of an ordinary working-class family.

This Messiah lived in tension with the organized religious system. He resisted the world's obsession with power, wealth, pleasure and recognition. He identified with the weak and powerless, with children, widows, orphans, the sick. He did not condemn but defended the sinner.

So again, what does God look like? Like Jesus! This is what we celebrate tonight! God looks like Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of God's values and priorities. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. In Jesus, we see not only the face of God but also the fullness of God's humanity. We see who we are created to be. We can believe in a God who looks like Jesus. This is what God looks like.

Here's why all of this is important: Because too often we view God like a shopping mall

Santa Claus. All we have to do is name it and claim it, believe it and receive it. We have created this Santa Jesus in our own image. He promises to fulfill all our wants and wishes. He's an idol for consumption who encourages our quest for meaning and purpose through the acquisition of material things instead of a relationship with God.

Our popular notions of Santa are very similar to how we have reduced God to a harmless watchdog who judges our niceness or naughtiness and gives rewards and punishments accordingly.

Come on. This is not the God we see in Jesus. Don't equate God with a magic gift giver. Jesus does not come shimmying down your chimney with gifts because God's gifts cannot fit under a tree or in a stocking. They must be received in our hearts.

If we keep clamoring for the material things we want from God, we will find ourselves disappointed because we have forgotten the weakness of God, what we call the poverty of God. We think of God as the harmless dispenser of all good things; but in a very real sense, God has nothing to give at all except himself.

Again, that question, what is your image of God? The picture you have of God, which is based on your experience of God, has everything to do with the shaping of your faith and values. If your image of God is distorted, your life perspective will be distorted. With a faulty image of Jesus as the magical gift giver, it is no wonder our expectations of Christmas have become so distorted. God doesn't do magic. Magic is an illusion, meant for entertainment, not for transformation. God came to work miracles in our broken world.

The real meaning of Christmas gets lost in the chaotic clutter of shopping, spending, credit card debt, making exhausting preparations and giving stacks of gifts that most of us don't need and may not ever use. In this chaos, we miss the true gift of Immanuel, God with us.

Christmas is the celebration of a miracle, but we've pushed the miracle worker off his own birthday. The dictionary defines *miracle* as a visible interruption of the laws of nature, understood by divine intervention and often accompanied by a miracle worker.

I want to lay something on you now...about this miracle worker business. God does Christmas through people, people just like us. That's right, you are God's miracle worker. You are. You are God's means to effect change in your world. God wants to birth a miracle through you. Just as Mary gave birth to Jesus, God wants you to bear Jesus to those around you. To share your faith, to tell others how you picture God and why Christmas is important to you. You've got friends and family members and co-workers who are craving to have that conversation.

Don't sweat it if you don't feel qualified. God will work the miracle through you. God doesn't need your ability. All God needs is your availability.

Jesus was ordinary. He was rejected, despised, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. Does that sound like the profile of a world movement leader to you?

My point is the power of Christmas is the power to create change in the world through God's presence and action in your life. The world is looking for the elaborate, the

expensive and the extraordinary which is why it always misses Jesus.

We look for meaning and fulfillment in the malls or on the computer screen or under the tree. But it is already here, no purchase required.

Jesus calls us to follow Him and to invite others to follow. He challenges every tradition and every value that we hold to be true. Miracles do not appear out of thin air, like magic. You cannot receive God's miracle unless you are ready and willing. So be open. Tonight is the best of nights to receive Him. This is a night of heightened spirituality, of a heightened awareness of the presence of God.

Christmas is not found in mindless spending, eating and stress. Rather, we find meaning when we care for those in need because by doing so, we are giving to Jesus. It's his birthday, after all.

It can be very difficult to make changes in our lives that will honor Jesus. But if we are willing to do all that we can, God will do all that we can't.

Amen.