

The Icon of God from Cradle to Grave

Advent I

1 Colossians 1:15-20 Luke 2:1-7, 23:32-38

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

What do you imagine God to be like? What is, in your estimation, the nature of God? Or, if God language is uncomfortable, what do you think is the character or the nature of ultimate reality? Or, what is at the center of the mystery of being? Maybe there is nothing. Maybe all of this is just a chance occurrence. But, if there is some center, and you could call it God or you could call it the Infinite Mystery, or however you would think of that, what would its nature be? If you think about God, maybe you think about the old language when we used to speak about the attributes of God. Well, what would be the center, the central attribute of God? Or, the mystery of existence? Or, the heart of reality?

You haven't thought about it recently, eh? It is not every day you get asked such a profound question. But, it is an important question, a very significant question, because there is a lot of truth in the claim that we become like the God that we worship, that we reflect in our nature, our being, our actions, our behavior, our attitude and our spirit, that we reflect what we consciously or unconsciously sense is in the deep depths and center of things. And so, it is not just a trick question and it is certainly not an intellectual exercise I invite you to, but rather, really deep down, how do you conceive God? What is your God like? What is the ultimate Ultimate at the heart of reality?

That is a fascinating question and an important question, and we enter the Advent season today around the table of our Lord and we come to remember and what do we remember? We remember Jesus, and we come to the table where the bread is broken and the cup is poured out and, as some years ago Dominic Crossan said so simply and yet so potently, where you have body and blood separated, that points to a violent death. Body and blood are not separated when you die in your bed. So, we come to remember Jesus, body broken, blood poured out, Jesus, a violent death. We come to remember that Jesus died, and we say Jesus died for us. In the traditional liturgy of the church down through the centuries, whether Protestant or Catholic, that death has been understood as an atoning death for the sin of the world. Jesus took upon himself our sin, clothed us in his righteousness, therefore opening for us the possibility of forgiveness and

peace with God. It is that move very early on, that understanding or interpretation of the death of Jesus that has made the church into a salvation cult. This is a place where you come to find salvation. This is a place where you come to have the assurance of sins forgiven and the assurance of life eternal. The church is the place of salvation. And to the extent that the church has become the place of salvation, the church has missed what I would suggest was the heart and center of the life of Jesus.

The New Testament speaks in several places of Jesus as the icon of God. I had Don read the passage from Colossians rather than Hebrews because it uses the Greek word *ikon* from which our word icon comes, which means image or representation or picture or figure. When you see the icon, you see the representation of that to which the icon points, and obviously, the claim is that to look at Jesus is to see the nature of God. We could have used that passage of the writer to the Hebrews, God who in sundry times and diverse places spoke to our forebears by the prophets as in these last days spoken unto us by a son who is the effulgence of God's glory and *the expressed image of God*. John in his Gospel says in 14:9, "If you have seen me, you have seen the father." Paul in II Corinthians in the 4th chapter, sixth verse, says that we see the light and the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus, the icon of God.

If we go to the Gospel of Luke, in fact, if we go to Matthew, Mark or Luke, one of the first three Gospels, we will find this life set forth, this life portrayed. In Luke's Gospel which is perhaps the most familiar and best loved, we have Jesus being born in a cattle stall, in poverty and obscurity, and dying on a Roman cross in ignominy and shame with grace on his lips. So, if Jesus is the icon of God, if Jesus is the image of God, if Jesus is the reflection of God, if Jesus is the embodiment of God, then this God pictured in the Gospel in Jesus' story is rather unGodlike, right?

If you go to John's Gospel, there is a different nuance. Maybe it is more than a nuance. This one comes from eternity assuming human flesh, carrying out the divine mission, but even in those moments of crucifixion very much still in control. But, not so the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. There we have Jesus in the beautiful Christmas story and very much a product of the social-historical moment in which he was born. He was born in the year in which Caesar Augustus was reigning who could make a decree that would cause peasant people to move cross-country, even a very pregnant woman on this torturous journey, as the story tells it so movingly, coming to a place for which there is no room for them, having to move into a cattle stall where a child is born, a child who is born and adored by the off-scouring of society, the shepherds who gather around in adoration. This one, born very much in his social- historical context in poverty and obscurity and humility, and the life of Jesus portrayed in that Gospel, as you go through it, is a life consistent with the humility, the compassion, the care, the love, the grace, not a pussy-cat, but a love that has iron in it, a love that is strong enough to confront the temple establishment or Pilate

in the moment of his trial, a love that is able - it's a strong love. This is no passive observer of life. This is one who engages life with power and with strength but always with grace and tenderness and humility. And then he dies as he dies on a Roman cross, condemned through the collusion of the church and the state, with grace on his lips. That is the icon of God. That is the representation of God in human flesh, human experience.

But there is a tension in the New Testament because the passage that was read a moment ago, the icon of God in I Colossians 1:15 goes on to speak about this one as the firstborn of creation. This one is really something; this one is the agent of creation; this one is in all things preeminent. In fact, in that same letter it says that in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. I am beginning to feel some tension here. The writer to the Hebrews says that this one who was the expressed image of God after he had made atonement for our sins, sat down on the throne and throughout the New Testament there is that movement toward the exaltation of the one who was humiliated. We'll come back to that in a couple of weeks. To be sure, Paul says in Philippians II that Jesus emptied himself. But, because he did, he was given a name above every name that, at the name of Jesus, every knee would bow.

So, we have this interesting thing going on in the New Testament. We have this picture of this beautiful human being born in humility, killed in humiliation, and the claim is that he is the icon of God from the cradle to the grave, or from the crib to the cross. And yet, we don't stay there very long. Very soon we want to lift him up. Very soon we want to speak about him as the agent of creation. Very soon we want to speak about him as the eternal word, and very soon we want to talk about him reigning at the right hand until he subdues all his enemies. A little tension there. I wonder why. I suggest it is because the church, when it got some power and credibility, didn't really want to stay with Jesus meek and mild. I mean, after all, if I am going to bow down to this one, I'd like this one to be worthy of my adoration.

Now, if you can play God for a day, if you could forget the Bible and the catechisms and all of your preconceptions, if you could just start out now, but basically being the human being you are, and you could create reality, shape it, how would you shape it? If you were going to call all things into being, how would you make it work? What would you like to be at the heart of it? I started out with a question - What do you think is at the heart of it? Now is your chance. Not, is that the way it is, but if you could do it, what would you put at the heart of everything?

And then a second question: How would you make that happen? What would you conceive of as the ideal, and how would you bring it about?

Let's just say you said I would create a world in which might made right. That's possible. A world in which might made right. Well, then the second question is not necessary because then I know how you would effect it; you would do it

coercively. You could exercise your power. If might makes right, then it is guaranteed. But, what if you were to conceive of a world whose heart and center were love and grace? Then how would you effect that? Then how would you make that happen?

If it is love and grace, there is no coercion. If there is no coercion, there are no guarantees. And if there are no guarantees because there is no coercion, then love can be defeated. It seems to me that is what happened between the cradle and the grave. God embodied in the flesh of Jesus entered the world in humility, lived with passion, love and grace, and died violently because that was the world's response to that embodiment of God as love in our midst. I'm not surprised about the tension in the New Testament because, as a matter of fact, who needs a God like that?

If you travel Europe a bit and go to the cathedrals, and if you go particularly to Italy to Ravenna, there are all these marvelous mosaics full of gold and I remember particularly in Ravenna in the dome over the chancel there is the Emperor Caesar, and over here another, and in the center up at the top there is Jesus, and that the name for that particular icon represented in that mosaic is *Pantocreator*. *Pan* is the prefix meaning all. This is the ruler over all. This is the ruler over all worlds. This one set in gold mosaic has the emperors down here at a decent level. This Jesus rules. This Jesus reigns. This Jesus will come again, by God! This Jesus will come with power and flashing glory, and will be a total contradiction of the icon of God that he was in the days of his flesh. Icon of God from Crib to Cross, from Cradle to Grave, humility, grace, compassion, tenderness, love. And then, because that is not the kind of world we really believe in, we transformed him into quite another icon, an icon with which we can live more comfortably, an icon who is the representative of a God, God Almighty, God all-powerful, God in control, God in charge. The only problem with this is, as I said at the beginning, we become like the God that we worship. And we, too, would be in control and believe that might makes right if might is ours.

So, what kind of a world would you create?