Sermon Series: Unwrapping His Presence

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John 1:43-51
I love Christmas Sunday! Advent is the season of preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. By now, much of the preparation is completed and we have the growing anticipation that Christmas Eve will be wonderful and Christmas is almost here. A dad was working in his study when his daughter came in and asked, “Daddy, can we play?” He answered, “I’d love to Sweetie, but I’m busy. In about an hour I can play.” She said, “Okay Daddy. When you’re finished, I’m going to give you a great big hug.” He smiled, “Sweetheart, I can hardly wait.” She turned for the door and was on the way out of the room when, suddenly, she made a U-turn and gave him a bone-crushing hug. “Wow! Thanks, darling,” he exclaimed, “I thought I had to wait ‘til I was finished.” She replied, “I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!” That is what Advent is all about. It is the season of looking forward to the biggest hug you will ever receive—the giving of God’s Son to our world and to you and to me. It’s all about getting ready for, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”

In recent weeks, we have talked about Jesus as the Son of David, the Son of Man, and the Son of Mary. While each of those descriptions carries a different shade of meaning, all three of them clearly indicate that Jesus is human, born in the normal way in a family of long history. I remember Martin Marty wrote a magazine article years ago with the title, “The Baby Jesus Had Diaper Rash!” He was simply pointing out that Jesus is truly human. I always get a kick out of the line in the Christmas Carol, “Away in a Manager” that says, “The cattle are lowing, the poor Baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.” Right! He was a baby. He cried. However, if Jesus was only a human baby, we wouldn’t be talking about him or celebrating his birth the way we are doing right now.
It’s the title of Jesus we talk about this morning that makes all the difference: Son of God. In the first chapter of the Gospel according to John, we see immediately the understanding that Jesus is God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people” (John 1:1-4). Jesus is the Son of God.

The chapter continues by telling us about the first meetings of Jesus with some of those who would follow him such as Peter, Andrew, Philip and Nathanael. The story about Nathanael is interesting because we never hear of him again until after the resurrection of Jesus. Nathanael is one of the people Jesus showed himself to. Jesus first meets Nathanael by walking up to him only to hear Nathanael say, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God!” Somehow Nathanael instinctively got it right, right from the start!

Jesus’ reply to him ends with this fascinating word, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” You see immediately, that with Nathanael referring to Jesus as the Son of God and Jesus referring to himself as the Son of Man, the dual nature of Jesus is plain for everyone to see. He is fully human and fully God. When Jesus refers to angels ascending and descending he is referring to a story in the Old Testament. Jacob, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fame, lies down to sleep one night using a rock for a pillow (real comfy I’m sure) and Jacob dreams, “There was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28:12). It is famously called Jacob’s ladder and Jesus is telling us that he, Jesus, is Jacob’s ladder. Jesus is the go-between humans on earth and the God who loves
us; something that is only possible because he is both fully human, Son of Man, and fully God, Son of God.

I get a kick out of how Nathanael meets Jesus. Nathanael was minding his own business when his friend Philip came up and said, “We have found him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote. He is Jesus from Nazareth.” Nathanael replies, “[Nazareth? You’ve gotta be kidding me.] Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” It would be like someone saying the Messiah, the Son of God, is from Vienna, Oakton, Reston or Herndon. Right! You’ve gotta be kidding me! Nevertheless, Nathanael goes with Philip to see this Jesus.

There is a remarkable saying we find several times in the Bible: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Sometimes people focus on the second half of the saying, “Do not harden your hearts.” Don’t put up a shield or be cynical about the voice of the God who loves you. And while that is huge, I find the first part of the saying fascinating, “Today, if you hear his voice.” When Nathanael heard the voice of Jesus, he knew instinctively, “This is the Son of God.”

You and I are bombarded with so much noise it’s hard to hear anything—blaring music in shopping malls, football games and on our cell phones, deafening announcements in airports. And there is all the noise in our lives that has nothing to do with sound but everything to do with distraction. A few days before Christmas, a worried little boy approached his mother and said, “Mom, I just don’t think it’s right to ignore Jesus.” The mom, more than a little confused, answered, “I agree with you. We shouldn’t ignore Jesus. But what made you think of that?” “Well,” he replied, “it’s that Christmas carol we sing in church, ‘O come let us ignore Him.’” With all the noise in our lives it’s hard to hear the voice of Jesus. It is easy to ignore him.
There is a term for this. It is a phenomenon called inattentional blindness. We get so focused on doing something that we don’t see the things that are in plain sight right in front of us. It’s what happens to people who text when they drive. I was preaching here one morning and my daughter Lindsay, who lives out of town, made a surprise visit and sat in the second pew right in front of me. I was so focused on what I was saying that I didn’t see her and was totally surprised when she came up after the service. “Dad, I take it that living at home for 18 years wasn’t long enough for you to recognize me!” That’s inattentional blindness! What gets your attention gets you. If you are consumed by your phone or the TV or your work or something that’s going on with a friend or a family member, it’s got your attention and it’s got you. If you never have a quiet moment to reflect and think, it’s going to be difficult to hear the voice of Jesus.

There is a great Youtube video that illustrates inattentional blindness. It’s called, “Disconnect to Connect.” You see a man walking on the beach with a beautiful woman. He starts to text on his iPhone and she disappears, although you can still see her footprints appearing in the sand next to him. A young girl in a minivan is texting and there is no one else in the van, although you can see the steering wheel moving while there is no one sitting in the driver’s seat. A woman is walking under an umbrella during a rainstorm. She is not holding the umbrella because she is texting. The umbrella bobs along but no one is holding it up!

You see a man sitting on his sofa texting. He happens to glance over his phone and he sees a crayon coloring a picture but there is no one holding it. He shuts the phone off and, instantly, a

1 http://www.visualexpert.com/Resources/inattentionalblindness.html
three-year-old darling daughter holding her crayon is grinning at him. The girl in the minivan shuts off her phone and suddenly the van is filled with people pointing to a gorgeous rainbow. The woman under the umbrella turns off her phone and suddenly her mother appears holding the umbrella. And the man on the beach turns off his phone. The beautiful lady reappears walking beside him and offers him a warm smile. Disconnect to connect.

Now I have as much of a challenge as anyone managing my use of my cell phone but my point isn’t about cell phones per se. It is that whatever gets your attention gets you. In all of the craziness of our lives, especially at this time of year, but not limited to this time of year, if your mind is totally focused all the time on whatever, you can become blind and deaf to what is going on around you and perhaps miss the voice of our Lord calling to you. This is Christmas Sunday. It’s a good time to turn off your mental cell phone, whatever it is that is consuming your mind and emotion, and hear the words of Jesus. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). “Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1). “Listen! I am standing at the door [of your life], knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Revelation 3:20).

Listen for the voice of Jesus. He is calling you, loving you, inviting you to come to him right now. And when you hear him, then do not harden your heart. Have a bit of humility and be open to him. God’s heart is calling the responsive heart, the soft heart, and the listening heart.

Many years ago, a play opened in one of Moscow’s leading theaters. It was called “Christ in Tuxedo.” It was a play meant to thoroughly ridicule the Christian faith. A packed house attended the opening night of the play. The first act centered on a church altar set up to look like a saloon bar with bottles of beer, wine and vodka with priests sitting around in drunken stupor. The second act featured a leading actor in Moscow by

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2 Source unknown.
the name of Alexander Rostovsev. Rostovsev was a devout follower of Karl Marx and a sneering ridiculer of Jesus Christ.

You can imagine the roar of the crowd as the second act opens with Rostovsev strolling out on stage pretending to be Jesus Christ, dressed in a flowing Palestinian robe and carrying a large New Testament. Soon after his entrance, he was supposed to read two verses from the Sermon on the Mount, the famous words of Jesus Christ, rip off the Palestinian robe, and cry out, “Give me my tuxedo and top hat!” As the script directed, Rostovsev began to intone dramatically the words of Jesus as he read from the huge New Testament. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” But then, instead of following the script, throwing off the robe and putting on the tuxedo and the top hat, he stopped as though he had been frozen.

An uneasy silence grips the audience when the smooth, suave actor, his whole body beginning to shake, starts to read again: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” You begin to sense his inattentive blindness has been replaced by eyes that see and ears that hear. He went on to read every verse in Matthew’s fifth chapter.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. You are the salt of the earth. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Rostovsev read until he read every single verse.

The audience sat there, stunned. Backstage, other actors in the cast, perhaps thinking that he was drunk, began to cough and stamp their feet and call to this star of the Russian stage to get on with the cursings. But Rostovsev was no longer a ridiculer of
the things of God. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Rostovsev heard the voice of Jesus and his hard heart softened. Standing in the footlights, he who had ridiculed Jesus, now made the sign of the cross in the Russian Orthodox tradition, and cried out in the prayer of the thief who hung on the cross next to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into your kingdom!”

It was too much for the management, the curtain came down and word was given that Rostovsev had taken ill. The performance was canceled. Rostovsev heard our Lord. “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into you.” Today, if you hear his voice, hear him knocking on the door to your heart, I invite you to open your heart to Jesus. Make this the Christmas of your life. If that is the desire of your heart, there is a simple prayer in your bulletin under the sermon title and on the screen here. I am going pray it out loud and I invite you to pray it with me silently with your own mind and heart.

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.

There are many wonderful groups in this church that will help your faith to grow. Please consult your bulletin or contact Shannon Jordan at Shannon.Jordan@viennapres.org.