

Pastor Joe Polzin  
Matthew 1:18-23  
“Call His Name... Immanuel”  
Year B – Advent Midweek 3  
December 20, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do people picture God in their minds? What do they think about Him, if they think about Him at all? Some people may picture Him as He is often shown in cartoons and even in famous paintings—as some elderly man with white hair and a white beard, dressed in long, flowing robes and surrounded by angels. That grandfatherly figure is often thought to be kind and welcoming, but also somewhat aloof and maybe out-of-touch with reality.

Other people may think of God as an angry, condemning judge, perhaps sitting on a throne ready to send sinners to hell. He’s not someone they want to meet, and many conclude that a God like that *can’t* exist, so they choose not to believe in Him at all.

Many others, and this has been true throughout history and across cultures, are not content to *imagine* what God looks like. They feel it appropriate to confuse Creator and creation, and find something they can point to in this world and call it “god.” They turn *created* things, such as the sun, moon or planets, or any variety of things in the universe into gods, and say they must be worshiped.

Some even go one step further and turn these gods into figures of stone or wood or bronze, literally making a “god” with their own two hands. The prophet Isaiah mocks the logic of this kind of person, he says this person will cut down a tree; “[t]hen it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat.... And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’” (Isaiah 44:14-17).

The carpenter turned worshiper seems entirely unaware of the fact that he is bowing down to the other half of his cooking fire. It’s laughable, as are many of the false conceptions of God out there. But it becomes less humorous when we begin to see the false notions of God, and even the idolatry, that *we* permit in our own lives.

Of course, we know better than to worship things that look like grandfather figures or idols we make with our own hands. But how common is that we end up creating a false god out of something in our lives? False gods may at times look like money or power or popularity. We can even make false gods out of our family, our spouse, our happiness, our livelihood, our retirement security, our politics, even our good health. Whatever we put our trust in to ultimately take care of us in this lifetime above and beyond God, whatever we spend our time and effort building up for our peace and hope, whatever we turn to in difficult times and say, “Deliver me, for you are my god,” *that* is the thing that has become our god!

And what’s worse is that our persistent idolatry as human beings also leads us to twist and pervert not only *what* God is, but also *who* God is. What He’s like. Many people, because they worship something other than the one true God, will have all sorts of expectations or notions about what kind of God He really is.

Some people, because of their love of their own comfort and happiness, think of God as overly friendly and full of warm feelings. The kind of God who winks at sin, willing to overlook

it because He knows people are trying hard to be good and live a fulfilling life. God is on their side, because they've crafted Him to suit their needs. This kind of God welcomes everyone into heaven. You'll notice that there's no real need for Jesus, much less his blood and sacrifice. It's just a downer to talk about sin anyway, and an over-fixation on trying to figure out right from wrong.

Others will have just the opposite reaction, and get disillusioned with this world and assume God must be angry and unforgiving, a kind of divine "killjoy" about everything, with all sorts of commandments and rules and demands. So, finding no use for *that* kind of God, they depart from Him entirely, pursuing their own path. They, too, have no need for Jesus. They don't want to hear what God has to say in the first place.

And all of this comes back to that first commandment, and missing what is fundamentally most important: who God truly is. Of course, we may think, well, if there was going to be this much confusion, then why doesn't God just make Himself known to the world? Why doesn't He reveal Himself and get this guessing game out of the way, so that everyone would just know Him as He is? We may even think, well, it wouldn't be so bad to get a little reassurance for ourselves...

The truth is, God *has* done that, and we *don't* have to imagine or guess about God's identity, or what's He's like. He has told us very clearly, at least as much as our human understanding can grasp. It's true that to an extent, God has revealed Himself in His creation. In Creation, He shows that He is all-powerful, magnificent, and something wholly different from us, since we are unable to do such a thing as create out of nothing.

But He doesn't stop there. He has also revealed Himself to us in His Word as our Creator, as the Triune God, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And this Creator God also is willing to redeem and save that which He has created. We don't have to wonder about what He thinks about us. We have that familiar verse from John 3:16 that tells us, "For God so loved the world..." God does not allow for any guesswork to be involved in what He thinks about us.

But He doesn't even stop at *telling* us about His love in His Word. He was willing to fully and definitively *demonstrate* it in His Word made flesh. You see, God knew that the problem of evil and sin and death was going to take His direct involvement. It was not something *we* could do. It was something only *He* could do. And so, since the beginning, He promised a Savior would come to us. A Savior who would look like a son. An *infant* son to be precise.

That newborn infant, well, that was the sign that was given to the Old Testament King Ahaz. Ahaz didn't want to see it, but God gave it anyway, because it was a sign of victory over Ahaz's enemies and a gentle sign of comfort, a sign of the presence of God with His people. The sign was a virgin-born son who would be called Immanuel, a name that tells us just who that Son is: "God with us."

Fast-forward 700 years, and the time eventually came for Joseph, engaged to be married to the virgin mother of that son. But he, too, needed a sign of his own from God. Mary was expecting a child, and it wasn't Joseph's. In his mind, he could marry his bride, or he could divorce her. But that would subject her to public shame and possibly even death. Scripture tells us Joseph was a just man and unwilling to put Mary to shame. So, he decided to divorce her quietly, and at least preserve Mary's life.

But then Joseph received the sign he needed, the sign that King Ahaz had rejected so long ago. God sent His angel to tell Joseph, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Mary's holy child was to be named Jesus, a name that means "God saves," because this child *would* save his people from their sins. This was the sign

that Joseph needed and received. But it wasn't only a sign for Joseph. It was a sign to the whole world, that this virgin-born son is the Son of God, born among us as one of us. He is Immanuel—God with us. He is God Himself, stepping into this world, sent to demonstrate His great love for us.

The Apostle Paul writes in our Epistle Reading from Colossians, that in Jesus, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

There is no more wondering, no more imagination needed. If you want to see God, if you want to know what God thinks of you, look to the manger this Christmas. You will see Him there. God in the flesh, born for you. And then watch what He does. When the season of Epiphany begins after Christmas, and the Savior is revealed to the nations, you will see Him begin His ministry, begin His work. God in the flesh, who lived for you. When the season of Lent arrives, continue to watch Him. Look for Him on the cross. You will see Him there for you. God in the flesh, who suffered the penalty of death for your sins. And when Easter arrives, look for Him outside the empty tomb. God in the flesh, risen from the dead, so that you will forever know that He is God with us, God with you, your Immanuel, for all eternity.

Look to Christ. *This* is who God truly is. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.