

Sermon Title: The Human Face of God

Sermon Text: John 1:1-18

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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Joni Eareckson Tada has been a quadriplegic most of her adult life. A significant turning point in her faith journey occurred one night when she was in the hospital for a check up. That night they showed *The Birdman of Alcatraz* for the Monday night movie. After about an hour of watching Bert Lancaster clutch the iron bars and look out into freedom, she became claustrophobic. She felt so imprisoned in her paralysis. She knew God was working in her life and believed that good could come from her accident, but the hurt and pain she was feeling seemed to overwhelm all positive thoughts

That night Joni's girlfriend slipped in after hours and hid behind the couch in the visitor's lounge. When they turned lights out in the hallway and the nurses station cleared Joni heard a movement over toward the door. There was her best friend Jackie crawling on her hands and knees across the linoleum floor. She lowered the bed, grabbed Joni's paralyzed hand, turned her face toward Joni on the pillow and began to sing (this was a song they had sang in Church together)—Man of Sorrows, what a name, for the Son of God who came. Ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah, what a Savior.”

Joni says, “It met my need like nothing else. God does not give advice. He does not give reasons or answers. He goes one better. He gives himself. . . If you are the one who is at the center of the universe holding it all together . . . you can do no more than give yourself.”

God gives God's self. That captures the heart and soul of the message of John's Gospel. John's Gospel was written at least two decades later than the other Gospels and even a quick read through the Gospels reveals striking differences between John and the others. There is more spiritualizing going on in this Gospel and reworking of the stories of Jesus into a theological framework.

New Testament scholars Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock in “The People's New Testament Commentary” say this about John: “The community felt free to reshape traditional sayings of Jesus and compose new sayings in his name because it believed the Spirit of Christ was present in the community, and the community was authorized to speak for Jesus.”

We read earlier the entire Prologue to this Gospel, which is a highly poetic and theological introduction that introduces themes that will be developed as the story unfolds. John begins by talking about “the Word”—the Greek word is “Logos.” This word was used in a

variety of religious, cultural, and philosophical streams of thought in the ancient world and had a variety of meanings: word, speech, thought, reason, message, account, to name a few. It connected with all sorts of people.

Greeks and Romans, and those with no knowledge of the Hebrew Bible or Jewish tradition would have probably identified the “Logos” as the divine Reason that permeates the world, that enlightens every person, as John says, making the universe a meaningful universe rather than just chaos. Those with a Jewish background, however, would think of the creative word of God in Gen. 1:1, or the prophetic, revelatory word that came through the prophets, or the word of Wisdom, of which there are a number of connections in this passage. In Jewish tradition the “Word” was closely connected to and sometimes identified with the Wisdom of God often personified as a preexistent person and as an agent in creation. Any reader, Jewish or non-Jewish would have made a connection with the “Logos.”

John says that the Word became flesh. In the Old Testament “flesh” is the word for humanity in contrast to God. For example Psalm 56:4 reads, “In God I trust: I am not afraid; what can flesh do to me?” TNIV translates “mortals.” The Word—the Divine Reason that gives meaning to the universe, the creative, prophetic word of God, the personified Wisdom of God—this Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. That is, he “tabernacled” among us. The word John uses recalls the presence and glory of God in the tabernacle and temple dwelling among the people of God. What John is saying is that the presence of God, the glory of God has come to us in a way that some might find scandalous—in flesh, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God’s presence has come embodied, incarnated, enfleshed and we have seen his glory, the glory of a human being fully alive, a human being at one with God.

For Christians, Jesus is the human face of God. Jesus reveals to us what God is like. Any Scripture or tradition that makes God into someone incongruent or incompatible with the life and teachings of Jesus must be reinterpreted in light of Jesus. Jesus is the lens through which we seek God. Jesus is the ideal, the archetype, the goal and destiny of humanity, the very best we can aspire to and hope for.

*To Catch an Angel*, by Robert Russell, is the autobiography of a young blind man who lives alone on an island in the middle of a river. He goes rowing on the river almost everyday by means of a fairly simple system. He attached a bell to the end of the dock with a timer. The bell rings every thirty seconds. He can row up and down the river, and every thirty seconds judge his distance by the sound of the bell. When he has had enough, he finds his way home by means of the bell. In the young man’s words, “The river lies before me, a constant invitation, a constant challenge, and my bell is the thread of sound along which I return to a quiet base.”

Life is like a river and we are like blind men and women, we can so easily be swept away by the strong currents or lose our bearings when we venture out, we need a still point, something to give us our bearing and direction. Jesus, for Christians, is that still point, that quiet base, that keeps us centered in the eternal life of God and in the values, the virtues and work that is in keeping with the gracious and loving character of God. When we listen for and heed the voice of Christ we find our bearing and direction and remain in the flow of God's will.

Joni said, "God can do no more than give himself." This is what Jesus represents—God giving God's self. John says, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"—full of grace and truth. Of all the qualities and characteristics that John could have mentioned, what he emphasizes—what this community of faith sees as the most essential and central aspects of the God who has revealed God's self in flesh—is grace and truth.

Have you ever thought about the relationship between grace and truth? In human interaction between ourselves and God and among and between each other the experience or reception of grace often follows a confrontation with truth—the about ourselves and the human condition.

Theologian and peace activist Walter Wink tells of two peacemakers who visited a group of Polish Christians ten years after the end of World War II. The peacemakers asked the Polish Christians: "Would you be willing to meet with other Christians from West Germany who want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did to Poland during the war and begin to build a new relationship?" At first there was silence. Then one of the Polish Christians spoke up, "What you are asking is impossible. Each stone of Warsaw is soaked in Polish blood! We cannot forgive!"

Before the group departed they prayed the Lord's prayer together. When they came to the words "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us," everyone stopped praying. Tension swelled in the room. Then the one who had spoken out so vehemently trembled and spoke up: "I must say yes to you. I could no more pray this prayer, I could no more call myself a Christian, if I refuse to forgive." He confronted the truth of the gospel, humbly and honestly and repentantly. He admitted, "I cannot do it, but God will give us his strength!" God will give us God's grace and God's grace will be adequate. He doubted his human capacity to forgive, but he trusted the grace of God, that has come to us in Jesus, to give him the strength and the capacity to forgive.

John says, "Out of his fullness—the Word made flesh—we have all received grace in place of grace already given." God is an endless reservoir—a living spring that is constantly replenished—an inexhaustible supply of grace. As we in faith offer grace and forgiveness to others, we receive grace and forgiveness from God—we receive the grace that enables

us to forgive and receive forgiveness, the grace that in the midst of conflict and bitter resentment makes a way for peace and reconciliation.

Maybe you need to draw from this living spring of grace today. Has someone hurt you so deeply that your resentment and bitterness and anger toward that person or persons are so ingrained that you say, “I will never forgive”? God’s grace can help you forgive. Or maybe you have hurt someone by your decision and actions and you have brushed it off, and you have not adequately faced the truth of the suffering and hurt you have caused the other or others. God’s grace can help you face the hurt you have caused and confess it, and make restitution if possible.

If you are a parent and you are struggling with children and teenagers who just don’t seem to get it, maybe they are rebellious, or self-centered, or caught up in addictive or self-destructive behavior. There is inexhaustible grace made known in Jesus to give you the strength you need for this challenge.

Maybe a lifelong dream has been crushed and you know that what you hoped for and longed for will never come to pass. Or maybe you are going through a crisis in faith, and the things you were taught and held on to for so many years you can no longer believe and you are full of doubts. Or maybe the problems in your marriage, or in your life career, or in your own personal life and relationships are of such magnitude that they suck the life out of you and drain you of joy and vitality and enthusiasm about life. There is grace for you.

The availability of God’s grace doesn’t mean that all will be better; it may not. It may get worse before it gets better. But God’s grace is adequate to give you what you need to endure and cope.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us . . . full of grace and truth . . . And out of his fullness we have received grace in place of grace. God’s grace has been given to us in abundance in Christ and as we trust in the goodness and grace of Christ we draw from this abundance, we draw upon his love and strength and faith and hope and forgiveness. Drink from the well of his grace—you can’t drink it dry and there is always enough.

We thank you, O God, that you have come to us, in our sin and failure, in our ignorance and apathy, in our prejudice and hate, in our greed and lust, in all our selfishness—to confront us with it, yes, but to also show us the path to freedom. Give us the grace to face the truth about ourselves and give us the grace to give and receive forgiveness. For all the challenges that we face in our lives and families and church and community and world—let us drink from the well of your grace, a well that never runs dry, that we might have the faith and hope and love and strength that we need to overcome. Amen.