



Truly This Man Is God's Son

TEXT
Mark 15:33–39
Philippians 2:5–11

November 8, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Len T. Carrell

So we are continuing on in our conversation of God as “The Giver That Keeps On Giving” — looking at the extraordinary generosity of God’s Word. That is the focus of our sermon series.

So this week, the incarnation, there’s one thing I can tell you about incarnation. This week, I found myself walking around with a Royals hat on, and that’s incarnational in my world.

But the incarnation is God revealing to us, God’s living word. Tom has led us faithfully through God’s story. We started with creation as God’s first act of love. God speaks and brings life out of the darkness, out of the chaos of our nothingness.

This first act of love is God’s desire to be in relationship with us. This is not to say that God needed us to be God. No, this is just to say God chooses us. And then after that, it seems to be just one call story after another. God calls on someone to be faithful and follow the call, in order to send us all a message that God is faithful and has a purpose for our lives.

And yet our response to an infinite and eternal God, as

the fallen people that we are, is to second-guess God and to turn away and reject God’s call, thinking that God must be out of God’s mind. How could a God who is everything care about us, who started out as nothing? And yet even last week, we heard how God is persistent still and how God is tireless; how God being God could easily have just said, “I’ve had it!” and “I’m done with it!” and move on.

But God does not do that. We are told how God sent prophets to the people of Israel and continues to send us prophets today — in order that we will know that God is here, holding everything together; keeping us close; showing us the way of life. And then *this* happens. [Points to the artwork]

I don’t know if you can see the story being portrayed in this piece of artwork. But can you see what is at the center of it? If you look closely, in the midst of all the chaos of earthly existence, there is a man carrying a cross. Ironically enough, most of the people in the painting hardly notice him, this man struggling to carry his cross. So it shouldn’t surprise us if it goes by completely unnoticed

by its viewers. It’s almost as if we are meant to miss what is right in front of our eyes.

No one is paying any special interest to him. He has fallen to the ground with his cross over his back, and all of the people are milling about in the busyness of their ordinary lives. And at the center of what seems to be a regular day for them there is a man journeying to his death.

This painting is by a 16th century Dutch painter named Pieter Bruegel. He was known for painting big landscapes and peasant scenes. This is one of his better-known paintings. It shows the portrayal of the procession of Christ carrying the cross to a hill called Calvary.

What is striking about it is that, although Christ is placed in the center of the action, the scene seems to suggest the insignificance of Christ in it. What becomes haunting about it to all of us is how it reminds us that, even though we may place Christ at the center of our own lives, we often lose sight of the presence of “God with us” with everything else that is happening in our daily routines.

The crowds of people in this painting are oblivious to

the suffering servant who soon will be known as, and *is* the Savior of the world. They are focused on their children at play and their petty disputes and, of course, the guards carrying out the execution of the day. And in the day of Bruegel, executions would have been carried out casually and put on public display, much like they would have been in Jesus' day.

So why did I show you this? And why the cross? Well, because what is incarnational about the "fully human, fully divine" Jesus Christ, as far as I can understand it, is that "the extraordinary is known precisely in and through the ordinary."¹

I guess it's safe to say that we've reached a pretty pivotal part in our sermon series, perhaps even a moment that hinges on our own human history. To come face to face with God in the person of Jesus Christ must give us some indication of God's extravagant generosity towards us.

I would say that we've reached a particular part of God's creative story — a part when God's Word is revealed to us as the living word of God. It is a point in the story when God reveals God's own self to us in a particular time and place, as a particular act of love called grace, and is revealed to us in the very ordinary existence of human life.

But here's my fear: I fear that I know what some of you must be thinking. Last week we talked about the Old Testament prophets. Now this week we

finally get to Jesus and the New Testament, and this new guy takes us straight to the foot of the cross. There must be a few things he's leaving out here.

But there is a reason I chose to place us on a hill called Calvary, instead of a little town called Bethlehem. First of all, I believe it's too obvious for us to think of the incarnation and to only talk about God breaking into the world as a baby in a manger. And I have nothing against the baby Jesus. I love baby Jesus! But what I truly want to share with you is that I believe the manger and the cross are inseparable. The manger and the cross both tell us something about how nothing is impossible with God.

I have always been startled by the words of the centurion, standing at the foot of the cross: "Truly this man was God's Son." Surely Mark wanted us to know that this man's life was completely affected and changed by the grace of God. Surely Mark is saying something to us about how the incarnation of God was seen through the eyes of this man watching Jesus breathe his last breath.

Mark, as you know, is the earliest gospel writer who gives us no birth narrative. So this moment may just be Mark's incarnational revelation. He starts off his good news with the baptism of Jesus, then drives him into the wilderness and then sends him out to do his ministry in Galilee.

But in Mark's gospel, it is the naming of Jesus Christ

that makes it so unique. There are only two places in Mark's gospel where he names Jesus Christ the "Son of God": at the very beginning and then again here at the cross, through the words of this centurion. It begs us to ask the question, "What does this say about the revelation of God through the person of Jesus?"

For God reveals something through the entirety of his "fully human, fully divine" life and death — and not only through Jesus's miraculous birth and resurrection.

One of the biggest lessons I learned in seminary was that as modern readers, when we read the New Testament, we read it assuming to know who this Jesus is said to be, our Lord and Savior. But as these stories were written, or even as the early church was first reading them, they did so with a true inquisitiveness, with a deep yearning to know who this Jesus truly was.

There's a song from the mid-1990s that asks the question "What if God was one of us?" But the sentiment behind the song already assumes a very distant God. However, I'm not too sure this is what the Bible tells us about God at all.

Because if you recall, from the very beginning we are told that we are made in the image of God, both male and female; we are created in God's image. Then in the garden, we read how God forms Adam out of the dust of the earth, like a potter who forms clay in one's hands, and then breathes the

breath of life into him.

And God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and tells him to take off his sandals, for he is standing on holy ground. And the psalmist writes: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

Just from these few Old Testament images, we can see that God is the one who determines how distant God is to humanity. And it doesn’t seem right for us to say that the Old Testament God is some distant and withdrawn deity. Because that would mean that in the New Testament, this almighty, omnipotent creator who is born a baby in a manger and who dies a criminal’s death on a cross is also a distant and withdrawn God. How could that be?

If how I’m reading it makes any sense, I would have to say that in the Old Testament and the New Testament, we are dealing with the very same God — because it is a “God who loves and relates to us, because God is loving and relational.”

An old friend of mine and I recently reconnected on Facebook and over the phone. When he heard that I was now a pastor, he immediately asked me, with some degree of skepticism, if I “really believed Jesus was the Son of God.” And I said to him, in all seriousness, “God, I hope so!” Needless to say, we had a good laugh.

But that has been my experience ever since I went to

seminary. There must be a sign on my forehead that says, “Random people, please ask me about God.” Usually, I tell people this: “On good days, I believe grace is real, but on bad ones, I have to pray for God to convince me that grace is real.” But one thing I always share with people who ask me about my beliefs is something a good friend and pastor once told me: “God better be on that cross, or we’re in a lot of trouble.”

That friend of mine who asked me if I “really believed Jesus was the Son of God” also asked me this: “Is it OK to believe in God and not in Jesus?” My response to him was honest, but probably insufficient. I told him: “Look, I’m not the person to tell you what to believe. But I will tell you this. I don’t see how believing in God is any easier than believing in Christ. Because it’s not about what we decide to accept; it’s all about knowing that God in Jesus Christ has already accepted us. God does all the movement for us here. God does all the work.” And that’s why on most days, I need to pray for God to convince me of grace.

I tell you that story because to claim that God is with us through Jesus Christ does not in any way exhaust who God is. The incarnation may not reveal everything that we need to know about God, but it does reveal something very specific about who we are. It reveals that we belong to God, that we are loved and valued and claimed by God. For us to

say that Jesus Christ is God is to say that God is with us, and we are with one another, and we are with God.

I’m hesitant to tell you this, but what all of this means is that it’s not going to be easy to answer the question “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” Because that is not a question we are only asked once in our lifetime; it has to be answered every day. It is a question that God places in our hearts each and every day, every time we encounter a difficult situation or a complex relationship or a disgruntled person at a store; or when we see a person sleeping on the streets or a child being abused or people going to bed hungry or someone incarcerated unjustly. To accept that we are accepted, to know that God is with us, means our faith is going to be challenged every day.

One of my professors at Austin seminary, Cynthia Rigby, puts it this way: “To call Jesus Christ God reminds us that the rest of us are not.” She also says it reminds us that “we do not get the luxury of standing back from God trying to negotiate [our own] terms of exchange.”² The incarnation of God means that God meets us exactly where we are. As Paul puts it: “God emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, God humbled God’s own self and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.”

The incarnation means that God pursues us all the way to the cross. God, I hope so!

It means that we can be confident enough to say that God has placed God's own self at the center of our existence, so whether we like it or not, God is completely with us, and we are with God. We do not get to determine our own distance away from God, or from one another, because the one who values us, claims us and loves us has told us that we belong to God and to each other. That is why I am both startled by and prayerful of these words, "Truly this man is God's Son."

God, I hope so!

Resources for this sermon came from an essay titled *Scandalous Presence*, written by Cynthia L. Rigby, The W. C. Brown Professor of Theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

¹Amy Plantinga, Pauw and Serene Jones, *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

²Ibid.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.