

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Seeing the Face of God

Luke 2:1-20

Once the angels had finished their sermon in song, the shepherds headed off to get visual confirmation of the gospel. Hearing the good news was one thing. Now they got to behold their salvation. "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. . ." (v. 17). For the shepherds, seeing was part of believing.

What did they see? Luke's description is concise: "They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger" (v. 16). A male infant, resting in a feeding trough. From what Luke has already told us, we know that he was snugly wrapped in bands of cloth. That could be an expression of maternal care, as well as a way of keeping Jesus' limbs straight and helping him sleep. But it also meant that when the shepherds looked at him, about all they could see was his head, his face.

When it comes to a new arrival, that's usually our focal point. True, we may note those cute toes and tiny fingers, but our main interest is the face. After all, that's where we might see a resemblance. That's where we hope to make the first emotional connections. That's where we might evoke a response from the child. The face, those eyes, that's where the action is. That's where we need to look.

This time of the year, baby Jesus' face is all over the place. Christmas cards, bulletin covers, postage stamps, T-shirts, billboards, online art, and a range of other media give us some depiction of what he may have looked like. The Scriptures themselves tell us virtually nothing about Jesus' physical appearance. We know that he walked and talked. We know that looked, listened, touched, tasted, and smelled. We know about many of the other things he did and said and experienced. But we don't know anything about his bodily appearance. When he tells the story of Jesus' birth, Luke doesn't include a footnote that reads: Weight: 8 lbs. 7 oz., Length: 21 inches, Eyes: Brown, Hair: Black.

In paintings and sculptures from previous centuries, babies often look different from babies in real life. The other people, objects, and events in the scene may look fairly realistic. But babies are often depicted with the proportions of small adults. Their limbs are relatively larger than baby limbs, and their heads are not as relatively large as baby heads. Infants are known for having large heads and short limbs. Yet they're often not depicted that way in artwork.

So I was struck by one painting that I came across by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jean de Bray. It's called *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. In this depiction, three shepherds kneel worshipping the newborn Jesus. Mary pulls back the covers to show them the child. The warm light and the subdued colors direct your attention to the infant, who looks at the shepherds with a face that actually looks like a baby's face. When the shepherds had seen him, says Luke, they started broadcasting the news that had first been delivered to them.

In one respect, this was news about how, in the face of Jesus, God has shown us his face. That doesn't mean God is a male infant, or a man in his early thirties, as Jesus himself grew up to be. God isn't gendered like we are. But the fact that God came to us in human form, as a person, in Jesus, tells us that God is personal, and wants to be in relationship with us. In this sense, God has shown us his face.

In the Scriptures, a person's face is often synonymous with his or her presence. This type of thinking is woven into the biblical portrayal of God as well. In fact, the most common Hebrew term for "presence" is also translated "face." This implies a close and personal encounter with the Lord. Sometimes encountering the Lord, being in the presence of the Lord, generates reverence. Sometimes fear. Sometimes flight. Sometimes awareness of sin. Sometimes comfort. Sometimes hope. Sometimes obedience and action.

The shepherds themselves encountered the Lord, and at first were terrified. But the angel reassured them that what God willed for them, and for the world, was peace and restoration and wholeness. The child born in Bethlehem was a Savior, not a Destroyer. Yes, this salvation would involve judgment, but judgment aimed at bringing about repentance and life. This was confirmed by the heavenly choir that showed up out of nowhere and started singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those he favors" (v. 14, NRSV). This doesn't mean that God has favorites. It simply means that he looks upon us with kindness, love, and mercy. This is the face of God, shown to us in Christ.

Dallas Willard, who lost his mom when he was a young child, once wrote about another little boy whose mom had died. Because he was especially sad and lonely at night, the boy would come into his father's room and ask if he could sleep with him. But even then, he couldn't rest until he knew not only that he was with his father, but that his father's face was turned toward him. "Father, is your face turned toward me now?" "Yes," his father would say. "You are not alone. I'm with you. My face is turned toward you." When the boy was assured of this, he could finally rest.¹

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24-26). That's the benediction that I sometimes pronounce upon you at the conclusion of worship. The Bible also speaks of times when God "hides" his face, or "turns" his face away from his people. This type of imagery is frequently used to convey experiences of God's discipline or judgment. In other words, there's a sense that because of their unfaithfulness and disobedience, God has pulled back, or hidden himself, from his people. So the psalmist's refrain is: "Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (Ps. 80: 3, 7, 19).

Christmas is about God turning his face toward us, making his face shine upon us. In fact, God goes so far as to put on a face, to take a place as a human being here among us, so that we could be rescued and restored. So if you want to see God's profile, it's not on Facebook. It's actually available in flesh and blood, in the form of Jesus.

Though some people have no doubt wondered what it would be like if God were on Facebook. What would his page look like? One person has suggested the following profile: Name: The Deity. Relationship status: Triune and serenely blissful. Number of friends: I only know. Unfriended: List currently blocked. Photos: None available (see second commandment). Timeline: From the beginning—Created the world, didn't I? What's on your mind?: What isn't? Recent posts: My book is still the all-time bestseller and the bestseller every year. Now have billions of worshipers. What ever happened to Zeus? Taking the day off. Thank me it's Friday!²

Imagine the shepherds squeezing in around the manger and taking a group selfie. In the midst of their faces you would see the face of baby Jesus, the face that matters most. In fact, we can only interpret our own faces, and know what they mean, in light of Jesus' face, and what it means. We can only know who we are by knowing who Jesus is. Christmas reminds us that we are people toward whom God has turned his face, in goodwill, mercy, and love.

That's why we want to keep our gaze fixed on the face of God revealed in Christ. As the Scriptures remind us, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15). But it's hard for us to set our sights on Christ, the image of God, when we're so busy using our devices, especially our phones, to capture images of ourselves. I'm not up here tonight to condemn selfies. They have their place in our lives. They can be a wonderful tool for creativity and self-expression. They give us a way of disseminating our image to others. They can help us capture moments and experiences that we'll cherish for years to come.

But we also have to beware of spending so much time capturing and polishing our own image that we miss the one whose image is what ultimately defines us. I remember a beautiful evening back in October. The sun was setting. Not a cloud in the sky. Across the restaurant parking lot was a man with his cell phone in hand, aiming it toward the sky. Or so I thought. I instinctively looked up, thinking that he had spotted something above that was worth a look, and a photo. But it turns out that what was worth a photo was himself. His camera wasn't really aimed at what was above. It was aimed at what was below. I had passed by just in time to witness his selfie moment.

Sometimes we're so focused on things here below that we miss out on things above. We're more captivated by self image than by God's image. So we need times and places and ways that we can redirect our attention and behold the Savior. Looking at his face on a Christmas card, a work of art, or a screen saver may help. Personally, I don't recommend looking for Jesus in some of the places that folks believe they have spotted him. Some of you may remember last year's case of a man who claimed to have seen the face of Jesus on a slice of toast he pulled out of the oven. He even tried to auction the piece of bread on eBay at a minimum bid of \$25,000. Jesus' image has also been spotted in clouds, on Cheetos, on trees, and various other surfaces.

If you're looking for the face of Jesus this Christmas Eve, you've come to a good place. The purpose of tonight's gathering is to hear again the news that the shepherds heard, that a Savior has been born to you. And to see what the shepherds saw, the sign from above confirming that God looks upon you with goodwill, love, and mercy. This sign from above shows up here below in humble and vulnerable form, with infant eyes that are still learning how to focus. Eventually, this baby's face will become an adult face that's looking at you, only this time from a cross instead of a manger. And tonight, the crucified and risen Lord turns his face toward you again, as a sign of his presence. As you look upon him, and see revealed in him the glory of God, it will change the way that you look at yourself, and at others.

¹ This story is summarized by John Ortberg, "God Is Closer than You Think." Dallas Willard Center <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/may/5052217.html>>.

² Adapted from John Ortberg, *All the Places to Go . . . How Will You Know?* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2015) 58.