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“A Good Look at God”

A Sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Corinthians 4:5-6; John 14:1-14

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Philip said to Jesus, “Show us the father and we will be satisfied.” Philip speaks for many of us. Do you want to see God? I ask you this question this morning because I have a hunch that one of the reasons that brings you to church is the desire if not to see God, to be closer to God, to be in a relationship with God. Let me be the first to acknowledge that seeing God is a worthwhile goal, but it is not easy!

Last weekend I was in New Orleans officiating at my nephews wedding. It took place in a lovely Methodist Church on St. Charles Ave. Soon after I arrived at the rehearsal I was introduced to the wedding coordinator, a delightful woman named Elizabeth Hutton. We talked about the service. After learning that I was a Presbyterian, she told me that she had grown up a Presbyterian in Atlanta. I asked her which church. She said “Druid Hills.” Well, I know many of the ministers of the church and several members. It was like old home week. She said, “I still feel more like a Presbyterian. I learned the Westminster Catechism as a child. “What is man’s chief end? To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” She did not stop there. “What is God? God is infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, in wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.”

My brother in law, the father of the groom, came over to us. “Are you alright?” She did one more, “What is sin?” Together we related the answer, “Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.” The

groom's father looked for help. "We have got a problem here, maybe we have to call security."

The catechism answer to who is God? "God is infinite, eternal, unchangeable in his being, in wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth." Many of us grew up with that definition, but that does not seem like somebody that is assessable. It gives us the impression that God is immutable and so far removed from us humans that God is unapproachable. At the beginning of John's Gospel we read that no one has seen God. (*John 1:18*) On the mountain, Moses' experience of the appearance of God was like a devouring fire. So devout was the Jewish understanding, of God that God was holy and removed, to be in God's presents was to have ones own life endangered.

God is not easy for us to behold. In the Old Testament it was a fearful thing to gaze upon the glory of God. God is holy distant and unapproachable. The Jews believed that if you could see God face to face, God would be an object under our control, someone that we could manipulate and use. Do you get the picture? God has been seen as unapproachable.

You may have heard about the young girl who was a budding artist. She loved to draw. One day her father came home to find her working on a picture, "What are you drawing?" he asked. "God," was her reply. "That is interesting," he said, "since no one knows what God looks like." "They will when I finish this drawing," she responded.

I imagine in the back of your minds, each of you has an image of God, what God looks like. Some see a kindly old man in the sky or maybe you see God in a beautiful sunset. The Brief Statement of Faith says, "like a mother God cares for God's children, like a father God welcomes our home coming." We draw images from our experience.

All of our images don't quite capture the essence of God.

In his farewell discourse as Jesus is preparing his disciples for his death, his going away, Jesus says a remarkable thing. Philip said to Jesus: Show us the father and we will be satisfied. "Have I been with you so long and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father!" This was Jesus' response.

If you want to get a good look at God, look at Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection. Even though no one has seen God, Jesus has given us a good glimpse. In the afterglow of Easter as we seek to take in the astounding implications of Christ living among us, this Easter season is a good time to look at God through the lens of the One who made God known.

The Reformed theologian, Shirley Guthrie, is helpful when he writes:

How do we come to know the Creator of heaven and earth? Where do we meet this God personally? In a weak, helpless baby lying in a cradle in a barn! In a Jew who was the friend of dishonest business people, prostitutes, and social outcasts! In a man condemned to die by capital punishment between two thieves! What an inappropriate place to meet "Almighty God"! How Unspiritual! But hidden in the peasant baby, this ancient Jewish preacher, this "criminal" – there is God speaking, acting, personally present. God is not a man, but this man is God-with-us. "No one has ever seen God; the only Son...has made him Known" (John 1:18, RSV). Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

If you want to know what God looks like, take a look at Jesus. Take a look at his acts of compassion, his devotion to the truth, his willingness to lay down his life for his friends, even when his friends desert him, deny him and betray him. He is the embodiment of God's love for us and for the world.

Jesus said to Philip, "If you have trouble believing this, look at the works." In other words, "Look at the things I have done. Look at the way people have been healed and given hope, look at the way people have been given a second chance. Look at what God is doing among you."

This is Jesus who for us "the way, the truth and the life." Christians have used these words to exclude others who are not Christian. This seems to me to miss the point. Jesus who shows us the way who is the way, who was always opening doors to let others in, and expanding the table to make room.

We need the way of Jesus to be our way, the truth of God's expansive love to be our truth. We need this life to offer new life to a world that seems hell bent on self-destruction. We need with our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist friends and neighbors to look at each other through the lens of One who gave of

himself that the ways of God might flourish and prosper in our world. He came to reconcile us to each other.

Krister Stendahl died this week. He was an outstanding New Testament scholar and a teacher from whom I learned much. He served as dean at Harvard Divinity School and Bishop of Stockholm in Sweden. The study of Paul was his passion. He urged believers to find beauty not only in their own faith but also in other faiths. He called it "Holy Envy." He encouraged us as Christians to sing our love songs to Jesus with wild abandon without needing to demean other religions.

Let me be so bold as to suggest although we do not have a full length portrait of God what we do have in Jesus of Nazareth is a picture of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is a picture that we carry with us and it will carry us home. There is a wonderful line in a Joan Osbourne song that asks, "What if God was one of us?" God who is present in creation. God who is present in the daily miracles of love and compassion, forgiveness and hope. What if God who created the world beautiful beyond our imagining has come to live among us and we can recognize him in the face of Jesus Christ and in each others faces.

Philip said, "Show us the father and we will be satisfied." And Jesus said, "Look at me Philip, this is as good as it gets."

Thanks be to God. Amen.