

Welcome

Are you afraid of God?

I ask because in a number of my pastoral counseling relationships over the last several years, I've encountered a deep-seated fear of God that keeps people from connecting with God.

We'll spend a few sessions together, talking through their spiritual journey. They'll confess they struggle to read Scripture (who doesn't!?) and that they don't pray much. So we'll come up with some prayer exercises.

That they don't do.

And keep not doing.

So I press into that a little bit harder. After all, this person has usually sought me out for some sort of spiritual direction. They *want* a richer, deeper, more vibrant spirituality. They *want* to be connected to God.

Or at least they think they do.

But when they stop to engage in those spiritual practices, there's a barrier. Something keeping them from God.

Fear.

And not fear like the way the Bible says to fear God. Just plain old fashioned afraid.

Afraid that if they pray, God won't listen. Afraid that God doesn't actually want them. Afraid they're not lovable or worthy. Afraid of what God might ask of them.

The strange thing about that fear is how deeply it's buried. After all, I didn't corner them. Force them to talk to me. *They* want that connection.

What I often find is a disconnect. Between God and Jesus. Friends, a lot of us love Jesus. We love his outsider-embracing, truth speaking, power-challenging, world-changing ways. We want in.

But then there's God hovering behind Jesus. The God of the Old Testament, we often call him. The angry guy, the one who's always a step or two away from smiting.

Again and again, I've encountered this same fear: how good can Jesus really be if he is with the Old Testament guy?

So we're going to talk about Jesus today: who he is and how he's connected to the God of the Old Testament. We'll see that we've got everything backwards. Specifically, that we don't try to understand Jesus through the lens of the Old Testament, but rather we understand everything - the Bible, our lives, our world - through Jesus.

Today is about a perfect, divine love that casts out our fear and connects us to the source of true life.

Message

Since Easter, we've been in a series called Monday Messiah, where we ask what difference Jesus makes in our everyday lives. Last week was Pentecost, the day we celebrate receiving the Holy Spirit. This week is Trinity Sunday - Churches all over the world are celebrating what it means to say that God is three Persons - Father, Son and Spirit - in One God.

Since we talked about the God the Holy Spirit last week on Pentecost, we're going to talk about God the Son, Jesus, today. And then next week, we're going to talk about God the Father. SO three Sundays for the three persons of the Trinity. Three Sundays about the God who created us, rescued us and is making us new.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to John 1. Again, our natural impulse is to pit God against Jesus. I can't tell you how many jokes I've heard about God taking a Xanax after the Old Testament and really chilling out by the time Jesus is on the scene.

We think God the Father is the angry one and Jesus is the nice one - almost like a cosmic good cop, bad cop.

But John insists this is not the case. More than any of the other Gospels, John will not let us get away with pitting God against Jesus. For John, they are one and the same. He begins his whole Gospel with this beautiful, poetic prologue establishing who Jesus is and why he's come among us:

In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.

The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it...

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become

children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son...

From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. -- John 1:1-5, 10-14, 16-18

This prologue has a structural beauty to it that's pretty impressive - and easy to miss if you're not an ancient Greek scholar. The structure is a chiasm, which basically means it's a giant arrow.

[During this next part, have these verses on the screen]:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. (v1-2)

The Word became human and made his home among us. (v14)

No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. (v18)

[Drawing] In this case, the text begins in Heaven, where 'the Word', Jesus, is with God. The Word journeys to the Earth, where he 'made his home among us.' But the passage ends with the Word 'near to the Father's heart'. This structure is intentional, and it highlights the thing at the tip of the arrow. In this case, that's Jesus becoming human.

With that 'big picture' in place, let's work through the individual movements. John begins by positioning Jesus as God, but specifically as the "Word" through whom God created everything.

This sounds strange to our modern ears. But think with me for a moment: when was the last time you were awed by creation? Maybe you stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon and felt unspeakably small. Or you waded out into the ocean and beheld the vast sea spread out further than you could see. Or you spent a day climbing a mountain and finally got to the top, and after you caught your breath, you saw all the other peaks spread out round you, each of them a magnificent tower you haven't climbed yet. Or maybe you were just looking up into the skies at the millions of stars, each of them billions of miles away and impossibly huge and you realized just how small you are.

When Paul told the Romans that creation itself proved God, this is what he meant: we've all felt small. We've all experienced the impossible huge vastness of our world.

This is why ancient peoples worshiped gods in Nature. They understood that there's something divine about the world, that there's a spark of something bigger than us running through everything.

That smallness does something to us. Because the line between feeling small and feeling inadequate is thin. And it doesn't take long before we realize creation runs by a certain logic. The phases of the moon. The changing of the seasons. The cycle of life. What we now call the laws of physics.

And it doesn't take long for us to realize that, unlike the rest of creation, we don't have to follow the laws set up for humans. We can hurt each other. We can, instead of opening up and flourishing, turn inward and become small and selfish.

So we establish religion - a way to make things okay. We enumerate the laws that govern humanity and we create ways to appease those laws - punishments that balance the cosmic scales, sacrifices that appease the gods we've offended.

This is the world in which God's people lived. They had a word for that creation logic. They called it Wisdom. Wisdom is what made the world go round - literally. In Genesis 1, when God spoke creation into existence, God's divine speech is wisdom. It's the lifeblood of everything - including people.

When God made a covenant with the nation of Israel, God gave them a written record of the Wisdom for people. Israel called it their Way. It was a literal way to describe what they had: what does it look like for us to live the way we were created to live? What does it look like for humans to follow the logic of our creation? Here is the Way, straight from the creator.

In Hebrew, "Way" is translated *Torah*. It's what Jews call the revelation God gave to Moses, when Moses went up the mountain to meet with God. Moses brought down to the people God's Way.

But John tells us:

For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us. -- John 1:17-18

Moses never saw God. That's a strange thing for John to claim when Moses went up the mountain and talked to God. But the point John is making here is really cool:

When Moses went up the mountain, he was talking to Jesus. And who is Jesus? He is the very Wisdom of God, the Word of God, the Logic of God. The one with God in the beginning, through whom God created everything.

So when Moses went to get the Torah, the Way, the logic of human existence, he got it from Jesus himself.

That's all we had for over a thousand years. A record of the Way. But then, something miraculous happened:

The Word of God, the Way of God, God himself became human. He took on flesh and lived among us.

The logic of human creation became human.

The Way to human flourishing became human.

The one who created humanity became a human himself.

Sit with this for a moment: what we have in the Old Testament is a record of God's relationship with humanity, given by God, recorded by humans.

And then, God becomes human.

So this is not God vs. Jesus. Jesus IS God.

And it's not Old Testament vs New Testament. It's God showing us how to understand everything God's ever done.

Because now God has become human. The very creator has become the creation. The one who made us became us to show us how we were meant to live.

How does this change our Jesus vs God dilemma? It reshapes how we read our whole Bible. A lot of people want to imagine that the whole Bible has equal weight - that every verse somehow harmonizes with every other verse.

But not according to Jesus. Parts of the Bible have strict instructions about spending time in the company of sinners. Psalm 1 for instance, the first song in the Jewish hymnal, says, "

Oh, the joys of those who do not
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers. -- Psalm 1:1.

You can imagine, then, why some of Jesus' holy contemporaries got upset that he so often attended parties with sinners. He did more than 'stand around' with them - he ate with them, treated them like family and honored guests!

And when they criticized Jesus for this, Jesus quoted another Bible verse at them. "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.'" -- Matthew 9:13

For Jesus, the Scriptures about showing mercy outweigh the verses about religious ritual. According to Jesus, God cares more about character than ritual.

Which changes how we read all those places in the Bible that talk about ritual. There are a lot of them. And Jesus isn't saying they don't matter. He's saying that the whole point of the rituals is to shape our *character*. To make us who he created us to be.

I can't tell you how easy it is for me to get caught up in ritual. To read my bible, give to the Church, prepare for worship all as ends to themselves.

I need to remember that Jesus, the one who is both God and the ideal human, showed me that these religious rituals aren't ends in and of themselves. I read scripture to be swept up into God's story, to be shaped as one of God's people. I give to declare that I depend on God, not myself for provision. And I give so that I can be part of the larger work God does here through Catalyst. I worship because when we gather together, we are Jesus' body in the world, shaped by God to do God's work in the world. I miss something vital when I miss gathering with you to worship.

Jesus reframes everything. Because he is the God who came down to us to show us who God really is. He's greater than Moses, who climbed a mountain to receive a copy of the Torah. But now the Torah has come to us, and he's given us a new law:

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. -- John 15:9-14

Jesus has given us a new lens through which to read Scripture to approach other people and to understand ourselves: his own self-giving love.

You want to know who God is? You look at Jesus, at the one who willingly laid down his life for each of us. You want to know what your life is supposed to look like? You look at Jesus, at the one who remained faithful to God and committed to love those around him no matter how much it cost him, even up to and including his own life.

Jesus shows us who God is.

Jesus shows us who we can be.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We receive grace to become who Jesus created and calls us to be.

1. When in the last week have you connected to Jesus?
2. When in the last week have you been distant?
3. When in the next week will you be tempted to be distant?
4. How can you choose to connect with Jesus this week?

Assignment + Blessing

How does knowing Jesus is God come to you change your experience of God?

This week, read the stories of Jesus!