

“You’re Looking At Him”

When Sue and I went ice fishing in North Dakota last January, we stayed at the Woodland Resort for a three-day, all-inclusive package that covered guide services, lodging, meals and heat. We had high expectations for the fishing, but didn’t have equally high expectations for the resort restaurant. We were pleasantly surprised. The food was fabulous.

On our last night I asked to meet the chef and compliment him for the wonderful meals. I assumed he would come from the kitchen wearing a chef’s jacket and had. Instead, a nineteen year-old kid dressed in jeans, Nikes and a black T-shirt came to our table. *“You’re the chef?”* I asked. *“You’re looking at him,”* he replied. The young man had no formal culinary training. He said he learned the craft by watching his father cook at a local diner.

From North Dakota let’s travel to Wisconsin where, in October, a new world record musky was caught with a fly rod on a river near where Sue and I fish. On every trip we spend an afternoon in Hayward buying fudge, baked goods, and jumbo leeches. After eating ice cream at the West Dairy, we cross the street to the Hayward Fly Fishing Company where I talk fishing with the owners, Wendy and Larry. On our recent visit I asked about the 51” record musky, but Larry didn’t act particularly impressed. *“It’s the official record,”* he said, *“but a bigger one was caught since then.”* *“Who caught it?”* I asked. From behind the counter he produced a photo of himself cradling a fly rod musky caught the day before Thanksgiving that measured 53”! *“You’re looking at him,”* he said. He didn’t register the fish, however. He said. *“Wendy and I aren’t into the ego thing of getting our names in the record book. The love of catching and releasing big fish is*

reward enough.” I bowed down, for I was surely in the presence of a great fisherman.

The most persistent question asked about Jesus was, *“Who is he?”* When he went to the river Jordan for baptism, John saw him coming and said, *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”* He showed up at his home church one Sabbath and read the scripture from Isaiah, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed.”* He concluded, *“This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,”* and a voice from the crowd asked-- *“Isn’t he the carpenter’s son?”* Jesus asked the disciples, *“Who do people say I am?”* “What about you? Who do you say I am?” Peter said, “Duh. You’re the Messiah.” And Jesus replied, *“You’re right, Peter. Keep it to yourself.”* Jesus was drug before Pilate. *“Are you the King of the Jews?”* Jesus said, “You say so,” and not a word more.

Who is Jesus? The question is as pertinent as ever. He was a man. He was God. But how? Was he half man and half God? The early church declared that Jesus was fully human *and* fully divine. The Nicene creed and the Apostle’s creed were written during the first four centuries of church history in response to heresies concerning Jesus’ identity.

One heresy was called, “Docetism.” The Docetists said Jesus wasn’t human. He only appeared human. The “fleshy” material world was corrupt. There couldn’t be an incarnation because God would not do such a thing. Jesus was more ghost than human and that he didn’t leave footprints when he walked.

Scripture and theology affirmed that *in Jesus, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.* The incarnation was not punishment God inflicted upon God’s self. God *intended to dwell* and was *pleased to dwell* in Jesus. This is heavy stuff. We can’t wrap our minds around it, but it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t exercise our intellect. Church is not a place where you leave your brain at the door. Years ago J. B. Phillips wrote a little book called, *“Your God is Too Small.”* All of our insights and images of God are too small. Language fails us.

Who is God? The best answer we can give sometimes involves saying what God is not. In seminary we called this-- the *via negative*. For many years, Paul Harvey's radio program carried a feature called, "The Rest of the Story." One was called, *The Nothing Something*. At age nineteen, Hanson Gregory became the youngest sea captain on the coast of Maine and was decorated for heroism that same year. But this isn't why he's remembered. Hanson Gregory is credited with creating nothing.

In 1941, twenty years after Gregory's death, there was a debate sponsored by a national organization to determine if he had in fact created nothing. The debate judges weighed the strengths and weaknesses of both sides and tried to distinguish fact from folklore. Contrary to a popular version of events, Captain Gregory hadn't invented nothing by accident during a storm at sea. It took place years earlier, and the persuasiveness of the case swayed the judges. The Smithsonian Institution confirmed that nothing was invented by Captain Hanson Gregory.

A business began on his mother's stove when he was fifteen. Today it is a billion dollar a year industry. Hanson noticed that his mother's fried cakes weren't done in the center, so he poked a fork in the middle and invented something, which would forever comprise absolutely nothing -- the hole in the doughnut.

What isn't helps define what is. God has no beginning or end. God isn't an it. God is not an ideal. God has no gender. God has no beard. God isn't a member of a political party. God is what a theologian called, the "wholly Other."

But this doesn't mean God is a vague, ethereal, formless, vapor, either. In 1971 there was a song on the radio called, "The Spirit In the Sky." It was one of those early attempts at merging rock music and religion. Those of you who are no younger than 45 and no older than 58 or 59 are going to help me sing it. [Have congregation clap in rhythm, play guitar intro and sing one verse.] *"Goin' up the the Spirit in the sky. That's where I'm gonna' go when I die. When I die and they lay me to rest, I'm gonna' go to the place that's the best."* It was a rather silly song.

When life gets the best of you; when you've reached the end of your rope and all options have vanished; when you or someone you love draws near the valley of the shadow, you will need more than a spiritual fog or some cosmic construct to get you through.

We've been in the Gospel of John the past four Sundays. Throughout the gospel people struggle to understand Jesus. Whether talking with the Pharisees or the woman at the well, his answers hardly made things clearer. Who are you? I am light. Who are you? I am bread. Who are you? I am living water. Who are you? I am the vine, then I'll be a shepherd.

Chapter 17 is Jesus' prayer for his disciples. It discloses one particular thing Jesus taught them. "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world." (17:6a) In Jesus they found God. Not a copy of God -- not a facsimile, not a pint size version of God, but God in his fullness. "Now they know that everything you have given me is from you," Jesus prayed. (17:7)

They saw and we have seen the fullest expression of God we can possibly have in this life. Living at a higher altitude, getting a doctorate in prayer, or switching religions won't offer a better view. Christianity has the audacity to say Jesus is God.

If you walk through a Ba'hai Temple or a Unitarian Church, you will likely see a picture of Jesus. There will be other pictures, too -- of Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, and Confucius. They acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher, in a succession of teachers. There is nothing that distinguishes him from the others. He holds no exclusive claim.

We talk a lot about Jesus as an example and great teacher. I catch myself saying it. Our problem isn't Docetism. We have no problem believing in Jesus' humanity. We have trouble talking about his divinity. It's easy to call Jesus our example and not bat an eye, but we're hesitant to stand straight and say, "Jesus is God." A Bible scholar observed that among the first Christians

there is almost no reference to Jesus as a great moral example or a spiritual teacher. They called him God.

There are times at social gatherings that I meet someone, and upon discovering I'm a pastor they feel obliged to offer personal information I would rather not hear. It goes one of two ways -- "This is why I believe and this is why I don't." A gentleman told me, "I have nothing against you Christians or the church. You do some helpful things, but I can't believe what you do and keep my intellectual integrity. Religion is a projection of our anxiety and fear of death on to a caring God so we won't go through life sucking our thumbs. No offense, pastor, but religion is a crutch for people who can't face reality. The Bible is a human invention."

"No offense taken, pal." I replied. "You just demonstrated how little you know. If you were smart you would know the Bible couldn't be a book of our wishful thinking. If the Bible is just a human product it's not a very good one. We could come up with one a heck of a lot better than the one we've got! We could have made it a lot easier on ourselves by leaving out the stuff about loving our enemies, and forgiving seventy times seven, taking up our cross, and doing what God expects of us."

The disciples were in the upper room when Phillip said to Jesus, "*Lord, show us the Father and we shall be satisfied.*" Jesus replied, "Come on, Phil. You've been with me all this time and you still don't know me? Show you the Father? *You're looking at him!*"

There's no need to look beyond Jesus. Jesus is all the God we need. Every thing he said and did equals God. He is the common denominator between earth and heaven.

In Jesus the fullness of God was pleased to make his home. Saying such a thing is harmless if we lose sight of the fact that it was for the sake of God's fierce love that God became a human. We've heard so much about this wild, weird love and know it so well we forget that we don't know it at all!

John Shea introduces us to a five-year-old girl named Sharon. She presented her own version of the Christmas story and at the end she said to her listeners, “Then the baby Jesus was borned, and do you know who he was?” She whispered, “The baby was God.” Then she leaped into the air, dove into the sofa and covered her head with pillows. John Shea says that “Sharon had the only proper response to the good news of the incarnation, and those of us without pillows over our heads may wonder if we’ve really heard it yet.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, p. 51)