

December 8, 2013
Christmas is Not Your Birthday

What Does God Look Like?
Isaiah 9:2-7

Opening words: There are 365 days each year, but Christmas day is special. What is there not to love? Our favorite Christmas cookies tempt us for weeks. Our community is illuminated with Christmas lights. Our Christmas trees are decorated with ornaments that remind us of the past. Our calendars are filled with Christmas parties and our Christmas wish list contains the desires of our heart. Christmas is a time of family and friends. It is easy to forget that Christmas is a time to remember the birth of Jesus.

Last week, I began a new sermon series, *Christmas is Not Your Birthday!* This sermon series is challenging us to keep the true spirit of Christmas alive. Last week, I asked you to push aside the trappings of this month so we can remember the true meaning of Christmas. On Monday night, our discussion group met and discussed that theme. Many within this congregation have been doing just that for a long time. Today, I want to look at one of the great pieces of prophecy found in the Bible, Isaiah 9:2-7. This message is written with one thing in mind. I want you to appreciate Jesus. Let me call this message *What Does God Look Like?*

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
³ You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
when dividing the plunder.
⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.
⁵ Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.
⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

What does God look like? Most of us only have a guess, but Crystal McVea had the opportunity to find out. In December of 2009, she was hospitalized with pancreatitis. She was accidentally overdosed on pain killers and 'died' for nine minutes. She said, "I remember closing my eyes, and the moment that I closed my eyes on Earth was the exact moment that I opened them in heaven. The amazing and beautiful thing about that instant was that there was no question of where I was." She described heaven as a tunnel filled with bright light. She said the problems of this world began to fall off and communication with God was uninterrupted. She said time began to slow down and suddenly she was in the presence of God. McVea said, "I fell on my knees to worship him and I was saddened with the fact that I hadn't done more in His name while I had been here." She chose to return to this world when she heard her mother's voice. However, she knows heaven is still waiting for her in the future.

What do you think about Crystal McVea's story? Do you believe her story is the creation of too many pain killers? Or do you believe she did go to heaven? Every person must answer that question for themselves. I would like to talk to her and ask her today's question, what does God look like? If you would like to ask McVea a few questions, say, **"Amen!"**

When I was in college, I took a criminology class, the study of crime. One day the professor was lecturing on the importance of proper identification. Without warning, the door opened and a guy walked in carrying a piece of paper. He handed it to the professor and simply walked out of the room. The professor looked at the class and asked the question, what did the messenger look like? Everyone remembered something different about him. One person said he wore a faded blue tee shirt. Another person said it was a gray tee shirt. Someone else said it wasn't a tee shirt; it was a polo. One person said he had shaggy brown hair. Another person said his hair was curly. Another person questioned those hair comments and said, "How did you see his hair? He was wearing a hat!" A big heated debate broke out in the class, but the professor made his point. Making the proper identification is not easy. Now, if identifying a person is difficult, then how are we supposed to identify God?

Maybe that is why the ages have been trying to answer our question for today, what does God look like?

Today, I would like to look at three angles on our question. For years, the question was, what does God look like? No one really knows. On the day Jesus was born, the question changed. Christmas is the time to remember the incarnation of God. In other words, God became one of us; Jesus was God. When you looked at Jesus, you were looking at God. The question changed to, what *did* God look like? Since Pentecost, the question has been, what *will* God look like? All three questions revolve around the greatest life that ever lived, Jesus! My goal is to help you appreciate the uniqueness of the Master. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

What Does God Look Like?

This is question number one. What does God look like? That question is one of the great questions of all times. Don't look to the Bible for an answer, because the Bible doesn't help us. In the Old Testament, only four people saw God. There was Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. You can find those accounts in Genesis 17, 35 and 48. However, in none of those appearances is a description given. In Exodus 33:18-23, we are told that Moses requested to see God, but his request was denied. God said no one can see Him. Do you remember the story? God places Moses on the side of a mountain and covers his eyes. God passes in front of Moses, but Moses only sees his back. (He didn't want to see his back. Moses wanted to see his face!) The New Testament is even less helpful. God is always hidden by a cloud, like at Jesus' baptism or the transfiguration.

The art world has tried to answer the question, what does God look like? The image of God has inspired some of the greatest pieces of art in history. Did you know that prior to the 10th century, no one attempted to portray God? The reason was fear. That all changed in the 10th century. About that time, some part of a human body appeared in art to represent God, a hand or a small part of a face. By the 12th century, private art was created and showed more of God. Did you know, during the Renaissance, both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches protested the art world because they showed too much of God's form? When I think of God in art, I think about standing in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. It was painted in 1511. You have to look straight up to see God's fingers touch to create Adam and Eve. Yet, none of this information answers our question, what does God look like. God's appearance is a great mystery. If this makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** No one had hope of seeing God until our scripture lesson for today. Let's look at it together.

What Did God Look Like?

The words that you heard this morning were uttered 700 years before the birth of Christ. They were uttered by the prophet Isaiah, whose name means, "The Lord Saves." He is remembered as being long-winded. His literary contribution to the Old Testament is 66 chapters! Perhaps he said so much because there was so much to say. His was a politically stormy period for God's Chosen People.

Israel was in a state of decline. They are about to be consumed by the expanding Assyrian Empire. Their future was filled with questions. Yet, Isaiah seems to be able to see the big picture. He is telling them that they are not forgotten by God. The best is yet to come. With God there is always hope.

Today's scripture lesson contains one of the great prophecies of the Old Testament. No longer are we going to have to wonder what God looks like, because God, himself, is going to enter this world in the form of a baby. The question changed from "what does look like" to "what did God look like?" Seven hundred years after Isaiah uttered these words, the world saw the face of God. You know the story.

It all began with an unwanted pregnancy. A young teenager by the name of Mary finds herself in the 'family way'. Her future plans of a respectable life are over. She is the hot topic in her little town, Nazareth. With very few options, she travels to the home of her aunt, Elizabeth, to escape the judgment of her community. Elizabeth accepts her unconditionally and offers her hope. God did have a plan for Mary's life, and Joseph would take her as his wife. After nine long months, the baby finally arrives. Mary and Joseph are in his hometown, Bethlehem. The little town is crowded because of the required census. Mary gives birth to this unwanted child in a barn. No one seemed to care. They were just another poor couple having a baby. Aren't the poor always having babies? The only one who seemed to care was God, himself. He sent angels to some shepherds. They tell these commoners about the birth, and the shepherds responded by going to look for this baby. When they arrived, they looked at the baby. They must have counted the ten finger and toes. They must have expressed their best wishes. They must have gazed into the face of Jesus, not completely understanding the whole picture. They were not just looking in the face of a newborn baby. They were looking at the face of God. The question changed. Everyone asked, what did God look like? When I get to heaven, I want to look into the face of Jesus. If you are longing to look into the face of Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

What Will God Look Like?

This is the third and final question. What will God look like? If you haven't heard, Jesus didn't stay a baby. Jesus grew up into adulthood. His earthly ministry began at 30 years old and ends tragically at 33. He is executed like a common criminal and buried by his loved ones. The good news is, the grave couldn't hold Jesus. On a Sunday morning, Jesus comes back to life and walks this world for 40 days. Ten days after he ascends into heaven, the Holy Spirit comes. The divine helper came to help us do ministry in this world. Did you hear what I said? We are supposed to do something in this world. We are to do the work of Jesus until he returns. In a perfect church, when people look at us, they should see God.

During the Thirty Year's War in Europe (1618-1648), the King of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus, was slain while his troops were winning the Battle of Lutzen, in what is now Germany. Sweden was thrown into mourning, and government officials met to determine how to replace the king.

Some suggested a republic; others thought the crown should go to Adolphus' cousin, the king of Poland. The chancellor of Sweden arose and said, "Let there be no talk of a republic or of Polish kings, for we have in our midst the heir of the great Gustavus, his little daughter, who is 6 years of age." Some protested that they had never seen her. The chancellor said, "Wait a minute, and I will show you." He brought in Christina, daughter of the king, and placed her on the throne. One of the representatives who was especially suspicious of the move pressed forward and gazed intently into her face. Then turning to the assembly, he exclaimed, "Look at her nose, her eyes, her chin! I see in the countenance of this child the features of the great Gustavus. She is the child of our king!" From all quarters of the room rang the proclamation, "Christina, Queen of Sweden!" Let me ask you this question.

Has anyone ever seen God in you? I am not talking about the way you look. I am not talking about your chin or your smile. I am not talking about your eyes or your cheek bones. I am talking about the things you do. I am talking about your very presence. You are disciple of Jesus Christ! What do people learn about God by looking at you? Do you remember Crystal McVea? She said the words I hope you never say. Of her nine minutes in heaven she said, *"I fell on my knees to worship him and I was saddened with the fact that I hadn't done more in His name while I had been here."* How much have you done in His name? How much do you look like God? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**