

The Face of God

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Hymn: "Jesus, Once with Sinners Numbered" (*LSB* 404)

A new season of the church year, Epiphany. You probably know that it officially began January 6, the Day of Epiphany, the day the church remembers and celebrates the coming of the magi to worship the Christ child—these magi, these strange Persian magicians of sorts. If Jesus is for strange people like them, he's also for strange people like you and me and the whole world.

Epiphany means a revelation, a manifestation, a shining forth. In these weeks of Epiphany we get lots of readings that reveal who Jesus is. A pastor friend came up with a really helpful explanation of the church year. He wrote in his congregation's bulletin: Advent says, "He is coming." Christmas says, "He has come." Epiphany asks, "Who is He?" Lent, "Who am I?" Holy Week, "What it cost Him." Easter, "He is risen." Pentecost season and thereafter, "His love, our response." I like that.

So in Epiphany the question is, "Who is He?" Or we might say that during the season of Epiphany we are asking ourselves the question, "What does God look like?" That's the Epiphany season question. What does God look like?

It turns out that one way to find out the answer to that question is the same way we figure out a lot of things these days—by asking a computer. I know I'm not the only who has one of those Amazon Echo things in my house. In our house, we have fun sometimes asking it questions like, "Who's your favorite member of our family?" or telling it to make barking noises to really confuse the dog.

But in addition to questions about the weather or the sports scores, you can ask your Amazon Echo what God looks like. If you were to do so, and if she were to talk to some of her artificial intelligence friends, it turns out what God looks like is something like the creepy picture at the back of your bulletin. If you haven't looked at it yet, it's on page 15, this picture is one of the first things an artificial intelligence program called NightCafe came up with when given the prompt, "The face of God." This strange looking fellow. He doesn't look very happy. Looks like he has just woken up from a thousand-year nap. Has horns sprouting up from his head. That's the picture the artificial intelligence program came up with. It's creepier in full color.

That's if you ask a computer. You get a different answer if you ask the Bible. Ask the Bible what God looks like and you get Jesus. Paul says, "Jesus is the image," the visible face, "of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Jesus Himself says, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). Thomas praises Jesus after Jesus' resurrection, "My lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28) Jesus is what God looks like if you ask the Bible what God looks like. And not just any old abstract Jesus. It turns out, especially for us today, God looks like the Jesus here in Matthew 3 at the Jordan River with John the Baptist, surrounded by a bunch of people confessing their sins, going down into the waters shoulder-to-stinky-shoulder with all these sinners and their sins and the heavens opening up and God the Father saying, "This"—not creepy mountain man with horns coming out of his head—"this is my beloved Son." This is the One in whose face you see the face of God.

Which makes you wonder then where in the world NightCafe came up with this crazy picture. I'm not an expert on how artificial intelligence works, but I do know it has

something to do with scouring massive amounts of information on the web and then using various algorithms to mush it all together and come up with a picture. And I do know that part of that massive amount of information would be things like Matthew 3 in the Bible. Yet still this is what popped out of the computer when prompted with “face of God,” so I wonder why. I wonder where it came from.

Well, I have a theory. I mentioned that Amazon Echo in my house. What if the artificial intelligence program has been eavesdropping on my house and everything that goes on there? People say this is happening, that whether Jeff Bezos actually spends his evenings listening in on what’s being said in his customers’ houses, he could if he wanted to. What if something like that is going on? What if the AI said, “Well, that guy is a Christian and he believes in God so why don’t I hang out for a while and see if he can help me come up with a picture of what God looks like”?

Recently, one of Jill’s friends gave her as a Christmas present a plastic protector to put over the lens of her smartphone, because the friend is convinced that somebody somewhere is watching all of us through our smartphones and our laptops. And, you know, there are creepy things going on out there, computers listening in on us. I do not have arthritis. But so many months ago, I was talking to Jill about my mom having arthritis. And within a few hours both our inboxes were flooded with ads for arthritis medicine and for books on what to do if you suffer from joint pain. So, maybe it’s not too much of a stretch to say that this artificial intelligence that came up with this was listening to my Amazon Echo and was also watching through the cameras of all of us Christians and listening through our smartphones. And what if this really fancy AI had the idea of eavesdropping and hacking into all the devices of us Christians who talk

about God and say they are made in the image of God, and it watches and listens to them when they don't know it, sees and hears all the things we do with the people who live with us, and then because this AI machine is super fast, it mashes together all the stuff it's seen and heard and puts together a picture of what God must look like.

I'm being facetious about the eavesdropping (I hope). But ask yourself, what picture of God would some objective observer come up with if all he had to go on was you? That one's a child of God. That one's an image of God. Family resemblance and all. What image would he come up with of what we worship from just watching and listening? As someone has said, Out of a hundred men, one will read the Bible, the other ninety-nine read the Christian. What if the AI only had you and me to read?

"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, but do you come to me?'" In other words, "I know who you are and I know you know who we are. You are God, after all; you don't even have to eavesdrop on my smartphone or my echo or my computer camera. Just listen to all these people around here." By the way, that's the scene which is set up before this text. It says the whole country of Judea was coming out to John...*confessing their sins*. Back in the day people didn't do that in their hearts and minds. "Let us then confess our sins to God our Father." That's what we say and then you look down at your paper and read the words printed in bold type. But that's not what I envision here. It's more along the lines, "Let us now confess our sins to God our Father." And then John says, "You first." "And now you." All these sins getting confessed out loud and Jesus is hearing it. It's as if John is saying, Look at these weirdos confessing their neediness and their insecurities and their grumpiness and their

cruelties and their selfish hang-ups and their compulsions and that's not even the half of it. Because the really embarrassing stuff they're afraid to say out loud. "You don't belong here, Jesus. These are not your kind of people."

"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus says, No, John, these are my people, because these are the only people there are. There are only needy people and insecure people and grumpy people and embarrassed people. Those are the only kind of people there are and I'm here to save people.

"And when he was baptized, he came up immediately from the water, and behold the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on him, and behold a voice from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.'" This one right here, the one shoulder-to-shoulder with sinners, him, he's the one, not creepy mountain man; not Santa Claus who's finding out who's been naughty or nice; not blind Justice, weighing the merits and demerits of us all on her scales; not an absentee father, who doesn't care what you care about. No, this one with the needy, for the weirdos, He's the one. What does God look like? Who is He? Jesus in the Jordan with the sinners. With you.

Someone talked about it this way. He was joking about how you see these Christmas cards where there is one person on the Christmas card in the family who doesn't look like she really wants to be in the picture. It's the same person who if you saw her in public with her family and she's circa 14 years old, she'd be walking six paces behind, lest someone assume that that she was willingly walking with that weird couple she calls her parents. Jesus is the opposite of that. Jesus is the opposite of that person who doesn't want to be in the picture. Jesus is more like the photo bomber.

You're at the beach getting the Christmas card taken but there's some strange guy in the back who really wants to be in your picture. He really wants to be in your picture even though you don't think he belongs.

Think of Jesus as the ultimate photo bomber. Of all the pictures, of all the places Jesus doesn't belong, with all these people confessing their sins and nastiness, Jesus says, "No, I want to be in that picture. I'm the one who will be in all the pictures." Everything in our Gospel text conspires to say that. Three times. A voice from heaven: "This one, this one is my beloved son." Jesus says, "No, this is where I belong." A dove from the heavens coming down from heaven with His "yes," this is God's beloved Son. This is where He wants to be: In all of your pictures. What does God look like? He looks like Jesus refusing to be anywhere other than where you are. What does Jesus look like? What does God look like? He's the One in all your pictures no matter how ugly, in fact, especially your ugly ones. He's the one who at your Baptism said, "From here on out, I'm going to be in all your pictures. Wherever you are, I'm there to say you're forgiven. I'm there to say you are mine. I'm there to say you are safe. I'm here to say, to steal a line from my Father, 'You are my beloved. And in you I am well pleased.'"

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