

“The Way”

1 Chronicles 16:23-34; 2 Kings 21:19-24;
1 John 4:4-12; John 14:1-7

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Over the last three or four weeks, we have thought about God as “other;” we have thought about God as creator and about the creation God has given us, we have thought about how God comes in, and is present, and is part of that creation, and invites us to be people who are righteous. God wants to come alongside and encourage us to be righteous. That’s a great thing, to be righteous, to have our relationships be right—right with God, right with one another. I would hope that would be the end of the story, but if you are at all like me, you know that trying to live out those relationships, trying to make them fit or trying to do them right just doesn’t always work. Sometimes I do things that are wrong. Sometimes somebody else does. Sometimes we just don’t seem to see eye to eye and I don’t always seem to be able to do what God wants me to do either. So how can I be righteous?

One thing that I found is that I can’t really do it on my own. I really do have to look to the God that comes to us, that comes close. One of the ways God does that is through scripture. God brings scripture to us to help us see how God would have us be, to give us some direction and some hope. Perhaps it is through scripture where we are introduced to, I think, the most important way that God comes close to us. As I think about God, and as I think about God as other, I just can’t quite get my hands around God being close. People tell me not to anthropomorphize God, that is, don’t make God like a human. Well, that’s fine, except that it seems that God did that very thing. God becomes human. Perhaps that is so we can relate, at least in part. He comes to help us hear God in a way that is easier for us to hear. That’s at least part of what Jesus does, is come to us so that we might have one that we might really talk to. Sometimes that otherness of God is hard, but if I can think about a person it’s a little easier.

So as we think about what it is for God to come close and to come to us in Jesus Christ, we can think a little bit about who he was. There are some interesting things about Jesus coming to be with us. We can think about his life. It starts out with a mother who ends up being pregnant before being married. We all know that and embrace the story now. But then they go to Bethlehem and can’t find a place to stay. We think of them in a stable. We think of that wonderful night, but who comes on that wonderful night? These shepherd who have seen angels. It’s an incredible thing. But why the shepherds? They weren’t the most respected folks of their day. Who is going to believe these shepherds about these angels? We do today, because we have that image now. We have that sense of what a wondrous thing it was. But think about that birth. Then there are some kings who come to pay homage somewhere in the first two years and they really just end up causing trouble because what happens? Immediately Joseph gets warned in a dream and they have to flee to Egypt.

There are some things in this story that I often have struggled with. The idea of God coming to be among us, to be one of us is a wonderful thing, but sometimes I wonder

why it isn't a little bit more obvious. Why does he have to flee to Egypt? Why doesn't God use some of God's power to make that not happen?

The next thing we know, Jesus is twelve years old. He's at the temple. He engages in an incredible conversation with the rabbis, but he's not that dissimilar to a lot of twelve year olds. He seems to forget what his parents told him to do, and they take off without him. We don't see Jesus again until he's about 30 or so and he begins his ministry. As he does that, he uses scripture and he gathers a group of people around him, and he does begin to do some healing of folks. One of the interesting things about the healing that Jesus does is that in almost all the descriptions—there's at least one where he kind of gets his hand forced when they let the guy down through the ceiling—but most of the time when we hear of healing, it's not in front of a group of people. It's just Jesus and the person being healed. We see Jesus healing as a form of his care for another; his desire to bring them to health and to bring them back into community. What we don't see is Jesus up on a stage doing healings to get everybody to see what he's doing.

It's interesting. Jesus just kind of enters into our lives. He comes down and kind of seems to just take up with us. If we read the scripture today, he is talking to his disciples, telling them about who he is—he's teaching them. They keep having these questions. He seems to have taken on the mantle of humanity pretty well because it seems that Phillip has a hard time seeing him as anything other than as a human being. Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. I am the one through whom you will know the direction to go. I am the one through whom you'll know the reality God has given us. I'm the one through whom you will know the aliveness of faith." The next thing Phillip says, "Well, if you will show us the Father..."

Jesus entered into our lives so fully that Phillip has a hard time hearing what he's saying. It makes me wonder if Phillip's question hasn't been a question throughout time, and continues to be a question within our time. When we think about God coming to be among us, do we think about a man who is pretty normal, who is teaching, who is living out a sense of grace and love but not in a way that is flashed up in neon lights? I get a sense that that's what Phillip wants. "If you show us the Father, if you show us something astounding to help us see God, then we will be able to hear you." In an age when we have so much that suggests that if you just buy the right thing your life is going to suddenly explode into Technicolor and Dolby digital music. When we watch enough of the media, we feel like "my life must be pretty dull because all the shows are in brilliant colors with soundtracks, suggesting that there's a reality out there that I can't be part of unless I buy the right thing or watch the right show, or something."

There's a sense of salvation changing the world—changing it into something it's not, something wonderful, something that is perhaps thrilling, exciting, full of the deepest of sentimentality, or whatever. It's interesting how Jesus enters into our lives. Really he doesn't try to change the entire world. He invites us to change. I wonder if that's part of Phillip's struggle. We would like to see the world change, not be the change. We would like to see God do something for us, not just come with us into life.

Sometimes I think that's part of the struggle we have with what Jesus teaches us. It's things like if you want to save your life, lose it. Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you. Love one another as I have loved you. So much of it is focused in on how do we live day to day in a way that is giving of ourselves. Even when Jesus goes through the passion—and basically he hardly says a word—he receives what humanity gives him. We know that he takes sin with him upon the cross. There's a way in which he, in that moment, is doing something really dramatic, but it looks pretty normal. Even in his resurrection, he doesn't take his disciples up on the mountain top then. He rather meets them where they are. He meets them around a fire and eats some fish with them. He meets them along the road to Emmaus. He comes when they are in a prayer meeting together; he comes into their midst. And even after he leaves, he encourages them to continue on with what he's been doing: to hear, to allow his teachings to live on in who they are, to let the love of God be shown through their lives. It feels to me like an invitation to live in the present together and not expect that it's all going to be fireworks all the time, but begin to notice that life has a lot of subtleties to it, a lot of texture, a lot of complications. We can look for the over-the-top kind of stuff and miss the life God has given us.

God comes to be among us and to walk with us, guide us. He gives us one that we can hear, one that we can imitate, one that we can follow into life. It's not that over-the-top life of Hollywood, but it is a life that has a basic love and a sense of relationship to it that, yes, we fail at sometimes, but that we're called to again and through forgiveness and grace are called again and again, and through it we get to live together.

Sometimes it feels to me like there's so much hype about what should be that we miss what we have, and what we have is wonderful—a community of faith to be a part of, to share in each other's lives, to pray for one another, to encourage one another, to gather around a table together, to follow Christ together, even to argue together. All of this, I think, is a gift that God gives us as we allow Christ to be close and be the one we follow and the one to show us the way. He really started with just twelve people. There might have been a few more disciples, but he focused on those twelve and invited them to simply live out what he had shown them, continue that teaching, and we are part of it. We continue it. We gather around the table and recognize that there is a deep joy in being the people of God, a family of faith, a follower of Christ.

Lord, help us recognize your presence. Many times it is just turning to you in the midst of our daily lives, or remembering your encouragement to care for another, or to give of ourselves in perhaps what feels like mundane ways. Lord, as we share a word of encouragement or a gift of a hand up, you are in our lives and enlivening us. Help us let go of all that other stuff that promises so much but remains so empty. Let us come around this table, gathered in your presence, opening our hearts to your steadfast love to know the wonder of the life you give us, the joy of community, the grace of friendship, the hope of faith. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.