

Joy To The World The Lord Is Come

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The First Christmas Carols (Advent 2007)

John 1:14-18

If you watch a Christian being interviewed on Larry King or some other talk show, at some point in the conversation after the pleasantries are exchanged, you are going to hear the interviewer ask some version of this question: Are you saying that only Christians will go to heaven? Are you saying that your religion is superior to every other religion? Don't you believe that all religions are equally valid?

The unpopular claim of Christ's Uniqueness

Now, if the questioner is Larry King, the questions may be asked with warmth and a wink, a sort of implicit, "Oh, come on now...surely in this day and age you are not going to claim some kind of superiority concerning your view of God."

But if the questioner is more aggressive, the attack might sound something like this: "You know, you Christians with your claim of religious superiority are not very much different than the Taliban in Afghanistan, or Al Qaeda in Iraq. The problem with the world today is that everyone thinks that their view of God is superior to everyone else's. That's why we have all of these wars and religious fights between Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Muslims. If we all just stop saying that our particular version of religion was superior to everyone else and that no one else had any truth, the world would be a more peaceful place. Especially during this time of globalization, the only way that we can possibly get along is if we acknowledge that all religions are equally valid attempts at having a relationship with God."

Well, what do you think about that? How should Christians respond to this charge of religious chauvinism and spiritual arrogance?

I want to talk about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. But in order to do that, I need to clear the ground and share with you what I'm not saying and what intelligent Christians should not be claiming when they talk about Christ being unique.

Do admit that Christians are sometimes arrogant and obnoxious

To the charge of religious arrogance, many of us as Christians ought to plead guilty as charged. Christians often come across as profoundly arrogant and insensitive to other people's religious beliefs and convictions. Just listen to some Christian radio shows. The arrogance is appalling. Christians can be particularly obnoxious when they are ignorant of what other people believe.

Not too long ago, I got into a discussion with a Christian pastor about what Muslims believe. The basis for this pastor's low opinion of Muslims was that he had read the Koran once and underlined all of the negative verses in the Koran. I said to him, "Well, are you telling me that your reading through the Koran one time gives you the capacity to understand what Muslims believe better than what a Muslim scholar or cleric would say Muslims believe?"

"Well, I've read the Koran. I know what it says"

Do you apply the same standard to Christianity that you apply to Islam? Would you say to someone who says, "Well, I read the Bible once," that they've suddenly become an expert on Christianity especially if they started to pull verses out of context and said, "Well, here's what Christians think and here is what Christians believe, or would you rather say that in order to understand what Christians believe, I'm going to go to the best and wisest expositor of Christianity from within our Christian community. To be fair, shouldn't we apply the same standard when it comes to other faiths? Why don't we allow their best scholars and their best insiders explain their faith to us? How unfair of us Christians to apply a standard to other religions that we don't apply to our own. We don't want someone outside of our community or some fringe radical group define us. Why do this to someone else? We have to admit that Christian often can be arrogant and obnoxious.

Being arrogant and obnoxious is particularly annoying when you don't know what you're talking about.

Do not claim uniqueness for Christians

By claiming uniqueness for Jesus Christ, we Christians are not saying, or should not be saying, that Christians are unique. Every human being is made in the image of God and every human being is equally guilty before God of violating God's law. Because we're all made in the image of God, we all have the capacity for great kindness, great goodness, great love, great truth, and great beauty. We therefore find examples of great goodness, kindness, and love outside of Christianity. Go to a Muslim village, as I have, and you will see hospitality that would put American Christians to shame. Grow up in a Jewish neighborhood as I did and you will find Jewish people go harder after justice and create more beauty through art and music than in most Christian communities. Try to image the last 50 years of music without Leonard Bernstein, Itzhak Perlman, Paul Simon, or Bob Dylan. Imagine movies without Stephen Spielberg, Dustin Hoffman, Gwyneth Paltrow, Harrison Ford or Paul Newman. God's gift of creativity shines brightly outside the Christian community.

And because we are all sinners, Christians and non-Christians, you can find great cruelty and great sin practiced by Christians and non-Christians alike. It

wouldn't take very long in exploring Christian history to find that we Christians have often failed to live according to the teaching of our Master Jesus Christ. Of course the answer to Christian sin is not to get rid of Christianity, but to call us Christians to become more deeply Christian and more like our Master Jesus Christ.

So what are Christians saying? What are Christians asserting regarding the uniqueness of Christ?

Do challenge the claim that all religions are equally valid.

We're saying, first of all, to Larry King and to any more hostile interviewer that the claim that no one view of God is better than any other and all religions are equally valid, could only be true if there was no God or if God is an impersonal force and doesn't care what we believe about him. Only if there is no God could we say that all religions are equally valid, or in this case, all religions are equally invalid. They're all wrong. Or alternatively, only if God is an utterly impersonal force could all religions be equally valid. Because in that case, God wouldn't care what you thought of God.

But if God is personal then why do you assume that God doesn't care what you believe about him? What kind of person doesn't care if you think that they are good or bad, cruel or kind, liars or truth-tellers. What sort of person doesn't care anything about what you think of them?

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who was a Christian missionary in India before being a Christian missionary in England, said this:

If, in fact, it is true that Almighty God, Creator and Sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has – at a known time and place in human history – so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity, and to suffer and die a shameful death to take away our sin, and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation, if this is a fact, then to affirm it is not arrogant. To remain quiet about it is treason to our fellow human beings. If it is really true, as it is, that “the Son of God loves me and gave himself up for me,” how can I agree that this amazing act of matchless grace should merely become part of a syllabus for the “comparative study of religions”?

Do assert that Jesus Christ is utterly unique

But let's be clear at the front end of this talk the claim of uniqueness is a claim not even given to our version of Christianity which is often heavily influenced by our American culture and our limited understanding of scripture. Christians should reserve our claim of uniqueness for Jesus Christ alone. What we are

saying as Christians, or what we should say, is not that we are unique, or our holidays are unique, or our American version of Christianity is vastly superior to other religions. What we are saying is Jesus Christ is unique.

Again, uniqueness and superiority are terms we Christians should reserve for Jesus Christ. What we are saying is that Jesus is not just one of the great spiritual leaders in this world. As the great Bible teacher, John Stott, put it,

You cannot call Jesus the Great, comparable to Alexander the Great, Charles the Great, or Peter the Great. Jesus is not the great; he is the only. He has no peers, no rivals, no successors.

What we are celebrating at Christmas is not the birth of a great person. We are celebrating the birth of a uniquely superior person. I've been doing a series for Advent in which I've been looking at early Christian worship songs and hymns that are embedded in the text of the New Testament. Today, as we finish this Advent Series, we are going to look at John's claims of uniqueness for Christ in a talk that I've titled, "Joy to the World the Lord Is Come"

Let's look at John 1:14 together:

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Or in the NIV translation, "he is the one and the only". Literally, the word means "the only one of its kind; the utterly unique one." John is pointing to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and he is saying,

Jesus is uniquely God Incarnate.

Now, maybe you have seen this word, "incarnate" or "incarnation" and not exactly understood what incarnate or incarnation means. Incarnate comes from the Latin,

In carne = in flesh

The incarnation is the in-fleshing of God. And the word that John uses when he says the Word became flesh is a really shocking word. It is not just that God took on a human body, or God became man. The word "flesh" describes humanity in all of our frailties and all of our weaknesses; humanity with all of our limitations, the fact that we are dependent and we get hungry and tired and thirsty. God became a human being with all of our frailties. That's what John is saying by saying the word became flesh.

So, what's so unique about this claim that God was in-fleshed in Jesus Christ that God took on all of our limitations and all of our frailties? What is unique about that? What is so unique is that there is nothing like the incarnation in any other religion in all of world history. I was a comparative religion major in college. And one of the things that struck me then about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and still stuns me today, is that no other religion claims that their God was incarnate.

Jewish people, of course, reject the whole idea that God would somehow assume human flesh. Muslims, likewise, reject this claim. And Buddhists, at least classical Buddhists, never claimed that the Buddha was God come in the flesh. In fact, early Buddhism had no God and no worship. It took 500-600 years before divinity was accorded to the Buddha. But Jesus' contemporaries called him Lord and God.

There is nothing like the incarnation in any other religion. Hinduism does claim a number of avatars (ă'-vī-tar), or divine descents in which the god Vishnu is said to have appeared in Rama, in Krishna, and in others. But incarnation is not a good way to think about the Sanskrit word, avatar. To be truthful we must distinguish between what Hindus claim and what we Christians claim. Hindus do not claim that their religion is a historical religion. Hindus claim that Hinduism is a philosophical religion; it is a mystical religion; it is an ethical religion. For most Hindus it is not important whether the avatars actually happened in history or not.

Christianity is very different. Christianity is essentially a historical religion. Christianity claims that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was an event of history that took place in Palestine when Augustus was Emperor of Rome and Herod the Great was King of Judea and Galilee. If you disprove that Christianity's historical claims, you destroy Christianity. Christians believe that the incarnation is as much a fact of history as the American Revolution or the Civil War, or the existence of Abe Lincoln. We Christians don't just make religious claims about God's incarnation; we don't just make mystical or ethical claims. It is our claim of historicity that distinguishes Christ from Hindu avatars.

And Hindus say that there have been multiple avatars. So, for example, Krishna spoke about frequent rebirths. For Hindus, an avatar is a temporary manifestation or a temporary embodiment of Vishnu in human beings. But Christians claim that in Jesus Christ God finally, permanently, and unrepeatly took on human flesh and that this was the turning point for all of history. There is nothing like the incarnation in any other religion.

Now, again, it is important for us to be clear about what we're asserting is unique and what we're asserting is not unique. We Christians shouldn't say that Jesus' teachings are utterly unique, or that you can find no parallels to many of Jesus' sayings in lots of world religions. There are parallels to Jesus' Golden Rule and so on. We're not saying that Jesus' teachings are unique – although we

Christians think they are amazing. We're saying that Jesus is unique. The reason why he is so special for Christians is because Christ alone is God come in the flesh.

Why should we believe this?

Now, why is it important that we believe that Jesus is God Incarnate? One reason, among many, is if Jesus is not God Incarnate, then we have no demonstration of God's love for us at the cross. The Bible says in Romans 5:8,

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

But how is the cross a demonstration of God's love for us, if we deny that it is God Incarnate, whose arms are stretched out and whose hands are nailed to the cross? If Jesus is no more than just another wonderful human being along with other great human beings, then when we look at the cross all we see is a human being losing his life. Christ didn't give his life in place of anyone else. Instead, he was simply unjustly executed like so many other people who have been unjustly executed throughout history. It may be that in some obscure way, Jesus demonstrated the love of one man for his fellow human beings.

But God is not involved in the death of Christ, if it wasn't God hanging there on the cross. If the nails that went through the hands of Christ did not go through the hands of God, then we have no demonstration of God's love. Think about this with me. What is your definition of love? How do you know if someone really loves you? Is love just words?

Oh, I know some of you women have been taken in by sweet-talking men who told you that they loved you. But love is more than words. Love is also actions. Don't just tell me that you love me; show me you love me. And how does someone show you that they love you?

Well, love is supremely shown by sacrificing for you. A person sacrifices time by visiting you in the hospital, or listening to you when you are hurting, or sitting with you when you are grieving. A person shows you love by sacrificing money through the giving of gifts, or helping you when you have a financial need. A person shows love by sacrificing sleep as mothers and fathers do when they sit up with their baby or their child who is sick. And supremely, love is demonstrated when a person sacrifices themselves – when they give everything including their own life to protect you or to rescue you.

It is important that we see Jesus as God Incarnate because only if Jesus is God Incarnate do we find at the cross a clear demonstration of how much God loves us. Jesus is absolutely unique among all the people who have ever lived

because only in Jesus and his death on the cross do we find the supreme manifestation of the love, the self-sacrificial love of God for each of us.

The claim is not just that Jesus is God. The claim is that God came in the flesh. God assumed humanity. And it is because God came in the flesh that the Christian God can uniquely sympathize with men and women in a way that no other God, no other Lord, can sympathize. Christians are saying what no other religion claims: that our God did not stay in the safe confines of heaven remote from human pain or human weakness. Instead, our God actually entered this world. He took our nature. He lived our lives. He endured our temptations. He experienced our sorrows. He felt our hurts. He bore our sin. He died our deaths. There is nothing in our human experience that our God has not himself experienced.

There is a wonderful story written called The Long Silence, in which a jury of men and women who lived at different times in history decide that they are going to judge God. One female witness steps forward and says, "How can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?" She pulls up her sleeve to show a tattooed number from a Nazi Concentration Camp. "I endured terror. I endured beating. I endured torture. I endured death."

Then, a black teenager steps forward, lowers his collar and says, "What about this?" And around his neck is an ugly rope burn, the result of being lynched for no crime other than being black.

Witness after witness step forward. Each one had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering God has permitted in this world. One person cries, "How lucky you are, God, to live in heaven where everything is sweetness and light; where there's no weeping, or hunger or thirst. What do you know about all that we endured as Jews, as Blacks, as a Japanese child in Hiroshima, as a disabled paralyzed man? Before you are qualified to be our judge, you have to go through what we went through." And so the jury pronounced its verdict; God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man. The jury foreman reads their verdict:

Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him never get married or know the joy of having children. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and be convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be beaten; let him be tortured. And at the last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died.

After the jury foreman read his verdict there was a stunned silence. Nobody in the courtroom uttered a word. No one moved. They all suddenly knew that God had already served his sentence by becoming incarnate.

Only as man could God completely sympathize with us.

But we are not called upon simply to believe in the Incarnation. We are called as Christians to imitate the Incarnation.

Why we should imitate the incarnation

You say, "Well, how can we do that? We're not God come in the flesh." No. Of course not. Jesus Christ is utterly unique. He is the one and only Incarnate Son of God. But as God the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends us. We read in John 17:18 these words of Jesus:

John 17:18

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

These words are repeated in John 20:21,

John 20:21

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

What does it mean that we're sent into the world as Jesus was sent into the world? Well, one of the things it means is that as Jesus got inside our skin, we Christians need to get inside other people's skin. As Jesus entered our world, we need to enter other people's worlds. As he walked in our shoes, we need to walk in other people's shoes. What would that look like to enter other people's worlds and walk in their shoes?

Imitating the incarnate means we need to enter the world of other people's thinking. Committed Christians need to be found in every academic discipline at the highest levels – in science and social sciences, in philosophy and liberal arts, in professional schools and so on. Committed Christians need to be in the movie industry and the arts; in dance and music; in painting and sculpture; and in politics. Committed Christians need to penetrate every part of our society and be totally respected as experts in their particular disciplines. What keeps people from being able to believe the gospel and so be saved? Have you listened to people's objections to becoming Christians? Do you understand friend or family member well enough to know what is keeping that person intellectually from being able to receive Christ? We need to enter the world of people's feelings. Do you as imitators of Christ's incarnation try to empathize with people's pain, with people's unhappiness? We need to enter people's living situation. Do you try to understand and or walk in the shoes of someone who is homeless, or lonely, or addicted, or imprisoned, or impoverished? Do you try to walk in the shoes of a single parent or a divorced person or someone who is unemployed or poorly educated in our ultra-competitive and high skilled society?

One of the great illustrations of imitating the incarnate life was the great missionary Hudson Taylor, who in the 19th century went to China. Instead of living in a missionary compound with all the other European missionaries' safe and protected from the Chinese people he was evangelizing, he decided to penetrate deep inside of China away from the coast. He decided to take on Chinese dress, to wear a braid in his hair just like Chinese peasants wore, to eat and live and labor alongside of Chinese men and women. Hudson Taylor became a model for missions over the past century. He entered the world of the people he was attempting to reach.

Friends, is there anyway for you to more deeply penetrate into the world of the people you care about reaching for Christ? Not being safe and protected from behind the walls of Christian culture. But rather, without sinning like Christ, without joining people in their sin, is there any way for you to take a little more risk by entering more deeply the worlds of those you're trying to reach? Imitate the Incarnation.

Jesus is not only uniquely God Incarnate, but

Jesus is uniquely full of grace and truth.

It says in John 1.14 these words:

John 1:14

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And in John 1.16, we read this:

John 1:16

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

Jesus is full of grace and truth. Jesus is uniquely full of grace. He is the inexhaustible source of grace. I like that phrase in the original, "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace."

From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.

When we think of a relationship with Jesus, we ought to think of an ocean where one wave of grace crashes over us only to be followed by another wave of grace; and then another, and another, and another forever and ever. God's grace is never exhausted. There is never an interruption to the flow of the grace of God.

There is no limit to the grace of God. It is grace upon grace; one wave of grace following another.

What does this mean? Every day you can go to God for a new supply of blessing and unmerited favor. There isn't just a season of life where a person experiences God's blessing and God's favor and then that season ends. A new supply of favor and blessing can take the place of favor and blessing that has already been bestowed. At every stage of life you can receive, friend, a fresh supply of favor and blessing. There is grace available from God for you to live as a single person. There is grace available from God for you who are dating. There is grace available from God for those of you who are married. There is grace available from God to raise children. And grace to grow old. There is grace when we lose a loved one and there is even grace available for you and me to die well.

There is no season of life where we can say, "You know, there was no grace available for this." There is not only grace available in every season; there is grace for every sin and weakness. The grace of God is available to remove from us the penalty for our sins. But there is grace available to us to break the power of sin in our lives – to not just remove the guilt of sin, but to remove the grip of sin. You can go to God for that.

And one day when Christ returns, you and I will experience not only the grace that removes the penalty of sin and the power of sin, but when Christ returns - the presence of sin will be removed from us forever. Grace for sin.

Do you know that you can never exhaust God's forgiveness. Do you know that you will never hear God saying to you, "That's it! I have no more forgiveness for you. The well has run dry. This time you've gone too far. There is no forgiveness." If you have heard that voice – "There is no forgiveness for you," you haven't heard the voice of the God of inexhaustible grace. You have been listening to the devil's lies.

Why don't we believe in the grace of God that is pronounced on virtually every single page of the Bible? Why don't we believe in the God who shows us wave upon wave of grace?

Because we often think of Christ as being like Ebenezer Scrooge; that somehow the Christ we encounter at Christmas is stingy and withholding; that he demands the last ounce of work from his people and then pays people poorly. I love this hymn from John Newton, who also wrote Amazing Grace. Newton wrote,

Come, my soul, thy suit prepare;
Jesus loves to answer prayer;
He himself has bid thee pray,

Therefore he will not say nay.
Thou art coming to the King,

Large petitions with thee bring;
For his grace and power are such,
None can never ask too much.

How many of you really believe these words? How many of you believe that Jesus loves to answer prayer? How many believe that Jesus is the one person you can go to in this world that you can never ask too much from? You can ask too much of your father or mother. You can ask too much of your husband or wife. You can ask too much from dear Christian friends. But you can never ask too much of Jesus. He is unique. He is full of grace. Satan, from the beginning, has tempted human beings to question God's generosity, to believe that God is stingy. But throughout the bible, and especially in Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself to be the generous God, the gracious God, the giving God, and the open-handed God.

Jesus is not only full of grace; he is full of grace and truth. Jesus is unique in the history of the world in walking this tightrope of infinite forgiveness and uncompromising holiness. Jesus is no cosmic softie or dispenser of cheap grace that carries with it no demands. Virtually everyone else that we've ever encountered either errs on the side of excessive rigor and judgment; the person who is overly critical or very judgmental. Or they err to the side of excessive tolerance of sin and leniency. Parents constantly struggle to stay on this tightrope of grace and truth with respect to their kids. Typically, one parent is the gracer; and the other is the truther. Parents often find it difficult to get on the same page together with respect to their children. One says we need to get tough and draw lines with our discipline. The other says yes, but we first need to assure our children that we love them. Counselors and Christian pastors struggle to stay on this tightrope of being both gracious to people and unfailingly truthful. The Christian world is divided with conservatives majoring in truth and deficient in grace. And liberals majoring in grace and deficient in holding onto truth.

I believe, friends, that only as you and I spend time with him who is full of grace and truth can both of these things be embodied in our lives in a balanced way.

Jesus is uniquely God Incarnate. Jesus is uniquely full of grace and truth.

Jesus is uniquely intimate with God.

We read these words from v. 18,

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Literally, the text reads:

No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

John says that Jesus, the Son of God, is in the bosom of the Father. He is in the very closest possible relationship with God the Father that two persons can enjoy. And this phrase, “to be in the bosom” of another person; to rest in the chest of another person, this is borrowed right out of the Old Testament Hebrew in describing the relationship of a mother and child.

It is the closest possible relationship. Mother to child; husband to wife. Deuteronomy 13:6 says this:

Deut. 13:6

If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your ancestors have known)

Literally, it reads:

Deut. 13:6

If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife who is in your bosom, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your ancestors have known)

Jesus rests in the chest of the Father in a relationship of such close loving communion that the Father shares all of his secrets with Jesus. And Jesus shares all of his secrets with the Father. It is this unique intimacy with God that struck the disciples as they listened to Jesus pray. They never heard a man pray the way Jesus prayed. He spoke to God calling God by a term that no Jewish man or woman until that time, so far as we know, ever used to speak to God. Jesus called God “Abba – My Abba” And by the way, Abba is not just the word that a toddler would use of their Daddy, it is also a word that adult Jews would use of their fathers. It is a word of great intimacy and a word of great respect – Father, Dad, Daddy. No one has ever been as close to God as Jesus was. No one has ever enjoyed the communion with God that Jesus did. But Jesus calls us to imitate his intimacy with God.

In the gospel of John, John, called the Beloved Disciple, serves as the prototype of the Christian disciple. In John 13 we find the disciples celebrating the Last Supper with Jesus. Now, these disciples were not sitting on high back chairs in

front of a rectangular table. The disciples in those days would have been lounging on Roman couches, leaning on one arm, and reaching into dishes that are placed on a table in the center of this circle of couches. It says in John 13 that Jesus told his disciples, that "One of you is going to betray me." We read these words in vv. 22-25,

John 13:22-25

His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. 23 One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. 24 Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means." 25 Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

V.23 literally reads:

There was one reclining on Jesus' chest whom Jesus loved.

The same phrase is used of the apostle John being in the bosom of Jesus as we read about Jesus being in the bosom of the Father. John is imitating Jesus' intimacy with the Father. See, Jesus wants to be as intimate with us as God the Father was with him. What would it look like for you to be intimate with Jesus?

Bottom line: here's what intimacy with Jesus means. It means you share all your secrets with Jesus. You tell Jesus things about yourself that no one else knows and you do it all the time. You allow Jesus into the very depth of your being; into your fears; into your hurts; into your ambitions, into your guilt; into your hopes and aspirations. You let Jesus into everything. You become utterly transparent with him and you ask Jesus to share his secrets with you. "let me in on your thoughts, Jesus. Let me in on your dreams for my life and your dreams for the world. Give me, Jesus, your mind and your vision for my family, for my ministry, for my life."

And finally, Jesus uniquely makes the invisible God visible.

Jesus uniquely makes the invisible God visible.

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Now it is clear that people in the past did see God in the bible. What does John mean "no one has ever seen God" John means in the Old Testament the saints were denied a direct look at the glory of God. So when Moses asked God in Exodus 33 to see God's glory, God answered and said in vv.20-23,

Exodus 33:20-23

But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”
21 Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. 22 When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. 23 Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

Moses could see no more than God’s back. He could see God passing by, but he wasn’t able to see God’s face - God in his essential being. People in the past had visions of God, but they were always partial, they were always transitory, they were always God quickly passing by. But Christ is unique because since Christ was God the Son, he alone of all people who have ever lived was able to peer into the essential being of God. And as such he was able to reveal God in a way that Moses could not.

Moses was able to be used by God to free people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus, as the greater Moses, was able to free us from greater slavery – slavery to sin and death and the devil. Moses gave us the law which gives us in words a revelation of God’s will. Jesus is the Word and he gives us in his person a revelation not just of God’s will, but of God himself. Jesus, it says in John 1:18 makes God known.

John 1:18

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

You could say that Jesus is the exposition of God; Jesus is the explanation of God. Only the one who fully knows the Father can fully make him known. Jesus made the invisible God visible.

Back in 1944 Tom Torrance, who later became a theology professor in Scotland, was working for the British Army. He was a stretcher-bearer and he was following British troops on their attack on a small village in Italy. Just at the break of dawn, he came upon a young soldier by the name of Private Phillips, who was only 20 years old. Phillips was lying in a ditch mortally wounded. He had very little time to live. As Tom Torrance knelt down the soldier said to him, “Father, is God really like Jesus?” Tom Torrance wrote,

I assured him that he was – the only God that there is, the God who came to us in Jesus, showed his face to us, and poured out his love to us is exactly like Jesus our Savior.

And after hearing that, the soldier said, “I’m ready to die.” Professor Torrance wrote,

As I prayed and commended him to the Lord Jesus, he passed away. This incident left an indelible impression on me. I kept wondering

afterwards what the churches have done to drive some kind of wedge between God and Jesus. There is no hidden God, no God that Jesus didn't disclose. But only the one Lord God who became Incarnate in Christ.

Jesus makes the invisible God visible. God is exactly like Jesus. And when you die as a Christian, it is into the hands of God, who is exactly like Jesus, that we release our spirits. And friends, we are called as Christians to imitate Christ in this. The apostle John who wrote these words in John 1:18 also wrote 1 John 4:12 where he says:

1 John 4:12

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Is there a way to make the invisible God visible today? Yes, John writes, if we love one another. God is love in his essential being. And he has revealed his love for us through his Son and especially his Son's death on a cross. And now he calls us as the church to be a community of love this Christmas; to love each other out of the love we receive from Jesus. You see, the way the world is going to know that there is something radically unique about Jesus, is if they see his people loving each other in an utterly unexpected way. In the world, people gather together around human commonalities. Asians are friends with Asians; blacks are friends with blacks; whites are friends with whites. People gather around common vocations – lawyers are friends with lawyers; doctors with doctors; teachers with teachers. People with common interests develop friendships with each other – golfers are friends with other golfers. Hunters are friends with other hunters.

But the church, God's people, are called to display a supernatural kind of love, a love that is uncommon and unexpected. Friends, I believe that the reason why God desires a multicultural church and the reason his Spirit has led us in the Vineyard to pursue and pray for a multicultural church that breaks down barriers of race and age, and ethnicity and income, is because as we love one another in this utterly unexpected way, the invisible God is made visible. People are going to look at us and say, "My goodness, look at how they love each other across all expected boundaries. There's got to be something supernatural going on here. This is not expected; this is not typical." Maybe there is something unique about this person Jesus Christ, who this church claims to follow. Jesus Christ is not the great; he is the only and only! He is utterly unique. Let's pray.