

## Jesus the Son

Philippians 2:5-6a

December 1, 2024

### Prayer

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is a season set aside to anticipate and prepare for the arrival of our Lord. This year our Advent celebration will focus on the child who was born of Mary and laid in a manger. Who is He and what did He come to do?

Each Sunday we will look at a section of Philippians 2:5-11. This series is called the Divine Descent and will follow Jesus as the King of all Kings left His heavenly throne to take on human flesh, become a servant and die a criminal's death on the cross. But it does not stop there.

Because of His obedience God exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name. It begins high, drops low and then rises again. This movement of high to low to high is symbolized in this year's advent candle, which we've reformatted to help communicate what the scripture teaches.

For the next four Sundays we will gaze upon and look deeply at that babe in the manger. Stopping long enough to really look at and consider something is an activity most of us do not do very well.

Like the rapid-fire stories on a news broadcast, most of us have the habit of skimming from thing to thing. We seek to recognize it, file it and then move on to the next thing. But this Advent we slow it down as we pause to look more intently at that helpless newborn.

Gazing upon something of spiritual significance is called *visio divina*, or divine seeing. I have practiced *visio divina* with specific pieces of art, with nature and with orthodox icons. It is amazing what God can reveal when we pause long enough to look.

In the Landing and the Hub you will find bookmarks listing our Philippian's text along with a fascinating icon, a piece of art that may help you gaze upon the Christ and so see Him more clearly. Also in the Hub is a larger display that describes the different elements in the icon to give us a jump start in our pondering. This icon is also available on the Covenant blog site as a wallpaper for your phone.

Sometimes we don't see things until we stop long enough to look.

We begin today with a shocking statement about that newborn, and we find it in the first part of verse 6 in Philippians chapter 2. Beginning with verse 5, "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God..."

What did Paul mean by this short descriptive phrase, "being in very nature God"? To get there we need to do a little language work.

The word “being” (*huparcho*) carries the primary meaning of “to exist, to really, actually and fully be in a specific state.” Paul is saying that Jesus exists actually and fully in the nature of God. But what does he mean by the nature of God?

The word translated nature is *morphe* and can also be translated as the form of God or the image of God. *Morphe* includes the characteristics and qualities that are essential to the thing being described. So, to say someone exists in the very *morphe* of God is to say that the person possesses the essential characteristics and qualities of God.

The phrase, “being in very nature God,” means that Jesus actually and fully possesses the essential characteristics and qualities of God Almighty! A literal translation would say something like, “Christ Jesus: who being already in the form of God...”

This short phrase presupposes what the rest of the verse unpacks, that the being described is none other than the Preexistent God. The rest of the passage unpacks what this Preexistent God did, but we will avoid the temptation to add those things to the message. Today we want to take the time to focus only on who He is.

At this point we are gazing upon the babe in the manger prior to His birth. In fact, everything else we will say about this newborn only makes sense if you start from this point. Jesus is the Preexistent God.

Early Christians witnessed the resurrection and ascension. They believed that the One they had known as truly human had a prior existence in the “nature” of God because the human they knew was actually God in human flesh.

Preexistence is assumed here in the same way it is assumed in 2 Corinthians 8:9. Do you remember this passage our fall sermon series?

“Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through is poverty might become rich.” Jesus was raised in a home that lacked resources and as an adult He was homeless. This passage only makes sense if you understand His preexistence as God. Before He took on flesh, Jesus was rich beyond measure.

Think of all Jesus had. Consider all He gave up. Ponder what He gave to you. Sometimes we don’t see things until we stop long enough to look.

So, before Jesus was born, He existed as God. From where we sit it appears that this belief just sort of appears on the scene, but it was not a new thought. The Old Testament speaks about this to anyone willing to slow down long enough to see it.

In the Hebrew Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament—God reveals Himself as a single being. He is one. He gives us His name, YHWH.<sup>i</sup> Through His dealings with humans, we see that God interacts with us in three ways. There is the invisible YHWH, the visible YHWH, and the Holy Spirit of YHWH.

Scripture teaches that these are not three separate beings. This is one being but there is something wonderfully mysterious about this one...who seems to be three.

What is really interesting is that the visible YHWH is called The Word of the LORD. Whenever the Word shows up, He shows up in some kind of visible manifestation.

In Genesis 15:1-6 The Word of YHWH **came** to Abraham in a **vision** and then **brought** him outside. The Word was once further away. Abraham could see it. The Word then came to Abraham and brought him outside.

Galatians 3:8 says God **preached** the gospel beforehand to Abraham. Preaching implies a preacher. Who was the preacher that revealed to Abraham the good news of what God was going to do through the Christ?

In John 8:56-58 Jesus declares that Abraham rejoiced at the news of Jesus' coming and what He was going to do. His audience replied, "You aren't even 50 years old and you are telling us you have been with Abraham? To that Jesus replied, "I tell you the absolute truth, before Abraham was born, I Am."<sup>ii</sup>

In Genesis 18 it says that three men visited Abraham. When Abraham saw them, he knew one of those "men" was the LORD. Did he recognize the visible YHWH from previous encounters with the Word of the LORD?

In 1 Samuel 3:1-11 we read how the voice Samuel heard at night came and **stood** with Samuel. YHWH **appeared** to him at Shiloh (21) and revealed Himself to Samuel. The Word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, **reached out His hand** and touched his mouth (Jer 1:4-9).

And the Apostle John writes the opening to his gospel,  
In the beginning [before creation] was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn 1-3, 14).

Sometimes we don't see things until we stop long enough to look.<sup>iii</sup>

In the Old Testament we see the invisible YHWH, the visible YHWH, and the Holy Spirit of YHWH. One God. Three distinct persons. What does the New Testament say?

The Apostle Paul wrote,  
"...yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Cor 8:6).

<sup>4</sup> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup> There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people (1 Cor 12:4-6)

Matthew passes along this detail from Jesus' life,  
As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Mt 3:16-17 cf Lk 3:21-22).

Peter begins his first epistle with these words:  
Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:1-2)

And Brently did a great job two weeks ago unpacking Paul's concluding words in his second letter to the Corinthians,

<sup>14</sup> May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor 13:14).

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Equally divine yet inseparably one.

Scripture testifies to the mystery that God is one in essence and three in person. This self-revelation begins in the Old Testament and is given greater clarity in the New where we learn that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity.

As the Word of the LORD and the Son of God, Jesus is equal to and unified with the Father and the Spirit, existing in a perfect union and enjoying perfect community one with another.<sup>iv</sup> When we look at Jesus, we are looking at God.

Colossians 1:16, 17 declares this about Jesus:

<sup>16</sup> for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him.<sup>17</sup> He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.

The writer of Hebrews tells us in 1:1-3,  
Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. <sup>2</sup> And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command.

All these words describe the helpless newborn in the manger. Can you see Him?

Some maintain that all these words were added long after Jesus died and that Jesus never intended for people to conclude He is God. Some say that Jesus' deity was not actually part of early Christian belief but was formalized centuries later by church councils who were under political pressure to silence other views. But evidence for belief in the deity of Jesus is not just found in Scripture. The Archaeological witness has something to say here.

About 20 years ago archaeologists uncovered a mosaic floor from a Christian gathering space that was dated at 230 AD. Among other things, the embedded writing declares that the gift of the table (probably a communion table) is dedicated "To the God, Jesus Christ."

The major councils that would debate and formalize the statements of Christ's deity were still about a century away. And yet here, even when the Christian church was not a validated religion in the Roman Empire, the belief in Jesus' deity was already so much a part of this community's theological foundation that they embedded it in the floor!

But this is not the earliest mention. The extra biblical witness has something to say too.

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Pontus and Bithynia from 111 to 113. In one of his letters to the emperor Trajan he said that Christians were "accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god..."

More than 200 years before church councils started formalizing such things, the belief in the deity of Jesus had already been around long enough to have spiritual songs written about it.

Yet some still maintain that Jesus never intended for people to conclude He is God because He never made an overt claim to deity. While it is true that He never used those exact words, He did make claims that would be inappropriate if made by someone who is less than God.

In Mark 2:5-7 Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sins, something only God can do. When He was charged with blasphemy Jesus had the chance to clarify their understanding. He could have said that they misunderstood Him and what He was actually saying was something different. But He did not. Instead, He backed up His words with action

Jesus said, "It is easy to say to someone, 'Your sins are forgiven.' You can't see if that actually happened. But you can see if I heal him and if I can heal this paralytic then I can also forgive His sins." He then told the man to get up and walk, which the man did. While he didn't overtly say it, the crowd present knew what He meant. Jesus forgives sins.

But this is not the only example.

- Jesus said that the angels of God were His angels and the kingdom of God was His kingdom (Mt 13:41)

- God commanded them to observe the Sabbath day, but Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath, and exercised authority over how it is to be observed (Mk 2:27-28)
- He claimed to be one with the Father and said to know Him is to know the Father (Jn 14:7-9)
- He claimed preexistence, that He came from heaven and met with Abraham (Jn 3:13; 8:58).
- Although Scripture teaches that only God can give life, Jesus claimed the power for himself and said that those who believe in Him will live even though they die (Jn 5:21; 11:25).
- Jesus said He would one day judge the world (Mt 25:31-46)
- When Thomas called Jesus "My Lord and God," Jesus did not correct Him and when the disciples worshipped Him, Jesus did not stop them (Mt 28:17; Lk 24:52; Jn 20:28-29).

Yes, Jesus never overtly declared Himself to be God, but the people in His culture and speaking His language understood what He was saying through His words and actions. And I think it is important to note what His opponents thought. When they heard Jesus speak and saw what He did His opponents tried to stone Him for blasphemy. John summarized their response in his gospel with these words.

"For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18).

This belief that Jesus is fully God did not slowly develop in the minds of church leaders centuries after our Lord's crucifixion. The scriptures we've seen this morning are ancient texts that align with the archaeological and extra-biblical witness to confirm that belief in Jesus' deity was whispered before His resurrection and proclaimed after it.

From Abraham to the Christ people had 2,000 years to prepare for it and from the Christ until today people have had 2,000 years to respond to it. And respond we must because this is not just an interesting fact that we note as we move on to the next video on our news feed. The fact that the Preexistent God comes to us in human form impacts us in many ways.

Because of Jesus we can have a real knowledge of God. The prophets carried the messages of God. The poets sang the songs of God and the historians told the stories of God. But Jesus is God. To know the Father, all we need to do is look at Jesus.

Because of Jesus full redemption is available. The One who is life and did not have to die, died on our behalf so we might be redeemed from the power of sin and death and brought into His indestructible life!

Because of Jesus, we have been reunited with God and with each other. God crossed sin's chasm at a terrible cost to reach us and tore down the wall that divided us. Through Jesus we are empowered to experience life the way God intended.

Christ's deity impacts our knowledge of God. It is His deity that opens the way for us to experience new life in relationship with God and each other as it gives us the ability to worship Christ for who He is.

It is amazing what we can see when we stop long enough to look.

This morning, as we gaze upon that child in the manger, we see the Preexistent One, God Himself, dwelling in unapproachable light, enthroned in heaven, served by angels, God Himself who is about to leave on a journey of Divine Descent.

May God help us take the time to look this Advent season and may He bless us that we might see things we've never seen before.

## **Prayer**

We move from one thing to the next so quickly that we can miss the things you want us to know. In your grace, would you please slow us down over the next few weeks so that we might see more clearly who you are, why you came to us and what it is that we receive from you.

Heighten our awareness that we might express with our entire beings our desire for you to come and finish what you started in our lives and world.

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<sup>i</sup> When you read the Old Testament, YHWH is most often translated as LORD in all capitals. When you see Lord spelled in all caps then that is the translator's way of letting you know that this is God's personal name. No one knows how this was actually pronounced so what we hear today is our best guess.

<sup>ii</sup> Using the phrase "I Am" points the listener and reader back to Exodus 3 and the time when God revealed his Name to Moses at the burning bush. This very well could be Jesus saying He is God, but doing so in a veiled way.

<sup>iii</sup> We could have some real fun unpacking Daniel's vision of the Son of Man, a phrase which Jesus regularly applied to Himself.<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>iv</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity is also of great importance because it is intimately connected with the Christian's salvation. Traditionally, Christians have believed that salvation, involving forgiveness of sin and reception of new life, is possible because the second person of the Godhead took on human form without giving up his deity. In this incarnate form he bore the sins of humans as their substitute. Thus he was able to present to the Father the perfect sacrifice for human sin, on the basis of which the Father then forgave their sins and the Holy Spirit conferred new life. If the doctrine of the Trinity is not true, then the understanding of salvation must be modified. Erickson, M. J. (2000). *Making Sense of the Trinity* (p. 15). Baker Academic.