

Knock Knock, Who's There.

Part One: Who's That Knocking on the Door?

Sunday, November 30

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As I was thinking a few months ago about the approach of Christmas, I got to thinking about the story of the very first Christmas, and what those events meant for humanity.

For a lot of us, we have at least an inkling of how the story goes. Two thousand years ago a young couple named Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem and she has a baby in an animal stall because there is no room for them at the Holiday Inn.

But what makes that story important?

The thing that struck me as I was thinking about it a few months ago, is that that moment in human history was the moment when God came and knocked on the door of humanity.

The main character in the real story of Christmas doesn't put on a red suit and slide down a chimney. He clothes himself in human form and comes and knocks on the front door of the human experience. That's what the manger in Bethlehem is all about. What happens next makes all the difference.

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Think about that little leap of the heart that happens when someone knocks on our front door. Yesterday in the middle of the thickest snow fall we were tucked in around the fire and suddenly we heard a knock.

I know – we can get a bit jaded about door knocks, feeling intruded upon, somebody trying to sell us something. But even so, I think there is for all of us this little leap of the heart that happens whenever someone comes and knocks on our door.

In the midst of our electronic phone-based world it's a surprisingly human sound.

A knock on the door expresses so much intentionality. Rather than picking up their phone and shooting us a text, someone has gone out of their way to step out of their busy schedule, make their way to my house, get out of their car, and knock on my door.

It sparks curiosity. Who could it be? A stranger? A friend? A family member? On Halloween our son Sean and his wife drove down from Chicago, threw sheets over their

heads, and knocked on our door. They filmed Sharon as she offered them candy and then broke into a whooping dance of joy when she figured out who they were.

And it evokes possibility. I wonder what brings them here? What might it bring? A visit with a beloved friend, a gift, a meal, a package, a goody from a neighbor, a surprise? All of those things followed knocks on our door in the past two weeks.

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At Christmas we celebrate the knock of God on the door of humanity. That moment in Bethlehem expresses and awakens all of things: intentionality, curiosity, possibility, and connection.

Knock-knock jokes are some of the most light-hearted bits of humor we share. A lot of times knock-knock jokes are the also corniest bits of humor we share.

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Noah. Noah who?
Noah good Christmas knock-knock joke?

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Gladys. Gladys who?
Gladys Christmas.

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Anna. Anna who?
Anna partridge in a pear tree!

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Freeze. Freeze who?
Freeze a jolly good fellow!

Knock knock. Who's there?
Wooden shoe. Wooden shoe who?
Wooden shoe like to hear a decent Christmas knock-knock joke for a change?

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Arthur. Arthur who?
Arthur *any* good Christmas knock-knock jokes?

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Thermos. Thermos who.
Thermos be at least one decent Christmas knock knock joke!

Knock-knock. Who's there?
Anita. Anita who?

Anita break from these Christmas knock-knock jokes!

Knock-knock. Who's there?

Myrrh. Myrrh who?

Myrrh Christmas knock knock jokes?! You've got to be kidding!

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But the knock-knock-who's-there exchange becomes incredibly thought-provoking when you use it as a way think about what happened on the very first Christmas, picturing the manger in Bethlehem as the door.

Christmas is the ultimate knock knock moment:

Knock knock.

Who's there?

The king of the universe.

This morning we begin a new five-part sermon series that walks us through the four Sundays of Advent and up through Christmas Eve. In this series we'll be exploring five questions connected to the arrival of Jesus at humanity's door.

Who's that knocking on the door?

Why is he knocking?

Why does it seem like no one is answering?

Why does he knock so persistently?

And what might it mean if we were to open the door to him?

This series is designed primarily with those who are exploring the Christian faith in mind. And let me just say: we love to have people in our midst who are exploring what Christianity is all about. It's also meant to equip and encourage those who are already followers of Christ as you interact with others who are outside the faith.

This morning the question we're asking is . . . who is that knocking on the door?

What is God like?

You don't need me to tell you that no one has ever seen God. And his invisibility can really prove to be challenging for us as human beings.

Some have concluded that because we can't see God it must be because he is disengaged from life here on earth. We can't see God for the same reason we can't see Cincinnati. He's just too far away. He's off somewhere else.

Others have gone further and concluded that because they can't see God, there is nothing we can know about him for sure. The invisibility of God is like Maxwell Smart's

Cone of Silence. We are left to guess about him. We are all forced to be agnostics. None of us can know anything about God for sure.

And some have concluded that the reason we can't see God is because he doesn't really exist. He falls in the category of unicorns and dragons and ethical politicians. Just kidding. We all know that unicorns actually exist.

What is God like?

You don't get far down the road of asking this question before you realize that there are really just a few options for thinking about this.

Imagine there is a door between us and God, and that door is his invisibility. Thinking about it in sort of a simplified way . . . there are two sides that our answers could come from.

What is God like? Well, on this side, one option is *philosophy*, which is a human project of trying to make sense of life. Philosophy is grounded in *reflection*.

I start with what makes sense to me, I think and reason my way to an explanation of life and the world and everything else – including God. Based on thinking it through, it is reasonable to think that this is what the invisible God is like.

When it comes to how we think about God, a reason-based philosophical approach often leads to a way of understanding God that is really abstract and distant. God tends to be reduced to a very impersonal category like the Prime Mover, or the First Principal, or the Ground of All Being. The Great Get the Ball Rolling Guy, but beyond that there's not much that can be said about him.

The other option on this side of the door is the answer provided by *religion*. Religion has to do with how we view, and how we seek to relate to, some greater power or person outside of ourselves. If philosophy is grounded in my reason, religion is grounded in my *experience*. Based on my experiences in life, this must be what the invisible God is like.

As you know, this leads to all sorts of different contradictory views of the divine.

- There is one God. That's what Christianity and Judaism teach. Or there are many gods, as Mormonism and Hinduism teach.
- God is personal and knowable, as Christianity teaches, or God is an unknowable being, as Islam teaches, or God is more power than person, as Hinduism teaches.
- God is good and can only do good, as Christianity teaches, or God is author of both good and evil, as Islam teaches.

- God does exist, as Christianity and Judaism and Islam teach. Or God doesn't exist, as some sects of Buddhism teach.
- God is involved is involved in human experience, as Judaism and Christianity teach, or God is disengaged and uninvolved, as Deism teaches.

Obviously those all can't be true.

So imagining a door standing here, and we as human beings are on one side, and God is on the other side, both philosophy and religion operate on the basis of what is available to us on our side of the door. Based on our reason, or based on our experience, we arrive at conclusions about what God is like. And based on that, the idea of God is all a rather hopeless jumble of guesses.

But what if what we believed about God came from the other side?

What if our understanding of God was based not on human reason or human experience but was based on divine revelation? What if our coming to know God was not a matter of our guesswork but of God making himself known?

Instead of either philosophy or religion, the starting point is a radically different place: *friendship* with God, that he initiates, and it is rooted in *revelation*: God making himself known.

Psalm 25.14, John 15.15 and Romans 5.10-11 are just some of the many passages in Scripture that speak of the possibility of our having a friendship with God.

A friendship with God is rooted in God's initiative. He comes and knocks at our door.

And the things we know about God are not based on our guess work, but are also based on his *revelation*. We start not with *guessing* what is true about God but *knowing* what is true about God because he has made it known and shared it with us.



This is a picture of my dear friend Doru Butas. We just took this a few weeks ago during the study trip we took to biblical sites in Greece. It was an incredible trip.

In this picture we are standing on Mars Hill in Athens, right next to the Acropolis and the Parthenon. This is right where the apostle Paul stood when he spoke to the Areopagus council.

I'm sure you already noticed the shirt he is wearing. At the start of the day, Doru and I were walking about twenty feet apart and I heard someone say, "Boiler Up!" I looked over at the man, who was grinning and looking at Doru, and then I looked at Doru, who was oblivious, and then I saw Doru's t-shirt, which I had given him on a previous visit, and realized what happened.

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So, think about this with me. Think about the friendship I have with Doru.

There was a time when I didn't know that Doru existed. He was invisible to me. Seventeen years ago, I would have been an a-Doru-ist. I would have said that, because I never saw him, never heard his name, never met him, he must not exist.

Then rumors of his existence began to reach my ears, together with tales of the impact of his life on the lives of those who claimed to have met him. They had been touched by his grace and thoughtfulness and joy and their lives had been changed as a result.

I began to hear about him people I knew who had met him and spent time with him. "There is this pastor who lives in Romania who is so worth knowing. He's a wonderful, humble, joyful, godly guy who lives his life with great faithfulness for the Lord, equipping and leading other pastors, and shepherding his own church. What a great guy!"

Then a gift arrived from Doru, an expression of his thoughtfulness and generosity: a book about Romania delivered through Rody, a mutual friend.

Then I got a message that he planned to visit, and we began an exchange of email.

Finally, a visit. Meeting face to face. Having in our home. Beginning to get to know each other.

Which has led to my going to Romania about ten times, and which led to our doing a study trip together last month, taking us in the footsteps of Paul throughout different biblical sites in Greece.

What a wonderful friendship and partnership over the past sixteen years, during which he has become a dear friend.

The point of my sharing that is this: left to my own thoughts or experiences, who knows what version of this thing called a Doru I would have come up with?

But my friendship with Doru isn't based on guesses from my side of the door. It is based on revelations from his side of the door, as I've seen his impact and been on the receiving end of his generosity and heard his heart and read his words and spoken with him and spent time with him.

Think of how that relates to how we know God.

In the end, God himself is in the best position to tell us what is true about himself.

So what has God revealed about himself? What do we actually know about God?

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How God has revealed himself:

Well first, there are several places where we pick up rumors of God's existence, where we get glimpses of his handiwork and see what he is like.

1. We get glimpses of God in his creation

We live in a world that is the work of a divine artist, and everywhere we look we see evidence of his presence, his power, and his beauty.

The miracle of new life like Mercy or Sophia. The mystery of the northern lights. The incredible beauty and variety of the world: its mountains, its oceans, its jungles, its plains, its deserts. The majesty of the moon and stars. The humbling power of a summer thunderstorm or winter snowstorm.

Everywhere we turn we see the works of God, every one of which reveals something of his existence and his power and his artistry.

The opening chapter of the Bible tells us that God spoke the universe into being. When we look at it, we learn about him.

That idea is echoed in a number of places in Scripture.

Psalms 19.1 The heavens declare the glory of God.

Romans 1.20 Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made

But there's more.

2. We get glimpses of God in humanity, the crown of his creation

The Scriptures tell us that when God made the world, he gave us a gift *from* himself, but when he created humanity, he gave us a gift *like* himself.

Read Genesis 1.27 and

God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

I Corinthians 11.7

Man is the image and glory of God

That means when we look at one another, we can learn something about what God is like.

Obviously when the scriptures speak of men and women bearing God's image, that's not referring to external physical appearance. God's image in humanity has to do with what we're *like*, not what we *look* like.

The defining qualities of humanity, those unique gifts that distinguish humanity from the rest of creation: our reasoning power, our decision-making ability, our creative capacity, and our relational heart – all of those qualities reveal a personal and interpersonal God who is brilliant and beautiful, capable of deciding and acting and creating and connecting. When we look at the crown of God's creation, we gain a glimpse of our creator.

But there's more.

3. We get glimpses of God in his care for his creation.

When we look at this world's lavish abundance, and how perfectly suited it is to sustain human life, two things become clear.

It becomes clear that God knows our needs. As the one who created us and gave us life, He is intimately aware of our circumstances and our struggles.

But it also becomes clear that God is eager to meet our needs. This abundant overflowing world of ours is a portrait of the generous heart of God.

Read Acts 17.24-25

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth . . . he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

I Corinthians 4.7

What do you have that you didn't receive as a gift?

Look around you. The bounty of this world displays both how mindful God is of our needs, and how lavishly, how abundantly, how graciously he provides for those needs.

But there's more.

There is at least one other significant glimpse God reveals of himself in this world of ours.

4. We get glimpses of God in the changed lives of those who encounter God

We get glimpses of God in the way that people change when they encounter him. The Bible and this church are filled with examples.

For instance, early on in the early church, we're told that some of the followers of Jesus were brought before the religious authorities and asked to give account for themselves.

Acts 4.5-13

⁷ They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! ⁹ If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, ¹⁰ then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. . . . ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

¹³ When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, *they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*

Part of how God reveals that he exists and that he is powerful and that his heart is for good is in the life change we see in a person who comes face to face with him.

As Paul says in his letter to the church in Corinth,

II Corinthians 5.18

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: The old has gone, the new has come!

I think of my own experience as an atheist in college.

All of my closest friends – Ward and Stu and Carol and Doug – all of them were followers of Jesus. Why? What drew me to them?

To a person, they all lived lives that were other-centered and filled with purpose. They were content and peaceful, and they were gracious toward others. They were so different from the self-at-the-center person I was and others seemed to be.

My life was small, bent in upon myself, but their lives were large, opened up toward God and out toward others, and they were pictures of thoughtfulness and intentionality and beauty and purpose and peace. In all of those things they put on display the sort of God they followed.

But there's more. God doesn't just reveal glimpses of himself, important as those are. God reveals a much fuller picture of himself in the pages of Scripture.

5. We get a fuller picture of God in Scripture

God reveals himself to us in the pages of Scripture.

Who he is.

What he is like.

What he is up to.

And what he desires of us as the people he created.

On top of the glimpses of himself that God gives us in creation, we get a much fuller and more comprehensive picture of God in his self-revelation through scripture.

Ephesians 3.3-5

The mystery was made known to me by *revelation*. . . It has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

II Timothy 3.16-17

All Scripture is *breathed out by God* and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

I'm convinced that the core spiritual issue of our day is the question of authority. Where do we turn to get reliable answers to our questions? Who or what has the last word?

Over the centuries people have found the authority of the Scriptures to be compelling because of their proven historical accuracy and their remarkable explanatory power.

Nothing is able to explain why we are here at all, and why we are the way we are, and why life is the way it is, like the Bible is.

It isn't a product of human effort on this side of the door, filled with guesswork. It is a gift from the other side of the door, filled with revelation.

Let me share with you just two of the thousands of passages we could look at in which God reveals crucial aspects of his nature and his character

Both Isaiah 40.1-31 and Exodus 34.6-7, reveal a compelling portrait of a God who is both holy and loving, both powerful and personal, a God whose desire is to be in relationship with us.

The first passage holds in tension the limitless might of God and the tender intimacy of God.

Speaking through Isaiah, a spokesperson who God inspires to speak on his behalf, God says:

Isaiah 40.10-11

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart.

That passage holds in tension the truth that God is transcendent and high above humanity, and at the same time he is profoundly personal and intimately involved, bringing his strength to bear in the tenderest of ways toward his people.

The second passage is one of most quoted and referenced passages in all of Scripture. It's a passage that holds in tension the love of God and the justice of God.

Exodus 34.6-7

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin; yet he does not allow sin to go unpunished .

Moses asks God to reveal his glory. God agrees, but shifts the word just a bit. He tells Moses he will reveal his goodness.

Then he walks past Moses, declaring the things that are truest of all about him.

He is a God of love
Full of compassion and understanding

He is Generous and responsive to our need, even when we are undeserving of his generosity.

He is Patient, slow to get angry, Overflowing with love

He is True to us even when we aren't true to him
Giving grace and responding with forgiveness even when our hearts and our actions are out of keeping with who he is and what he intends for us

And at the same time, if we persist in defying him, he is a God of justice, true to what is right, punishing wrongdoing and allowing consequences to fall for those who do wrong

Those are just two of scores of passages through which God reveals what is true about himself.

But there's more. Up to this point, all of these revelations from God only allow us to know more *about* God. How do we come to *know* God, to enter into a friendship with God?

That's where the stable in Bethlehem comes in, where God knocks on the door of humanity.

5. We get a complete picture of God in Jesus.

Through creation and his dealings with us God reveals aspects of himself. Through the pages of Scripture God reveals much more of himself.

But God only reveals a complete picture of himself when he himself comes to us in human form and knocks on the door.

As it says in Hebrews 1.1-3

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

John 1.1-18 tells us that God broke the invisibility barrier, took on human flesh, and came to us to make himself known.

John 1.14,18

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. . . . 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.

Think about my friendship with Doru. I had heard his name. I heard the impact I had on others. I received a gift from him. I read his words. But it wasn't until he came across the ocean and knocked on my door that I began a friendship with him – a friendship that has changed my life.

* * *

Over the next four weeks we are going to be opening up the significance of this visitation. Why did he come to us? Why were we reluctant to open our lives to him? What might it mean for us if we do?

As we walk through this series, I'd like to encourage you to use this time to do three things.

First, read Luke's gospel.

There's a collection of writings about Jesus and about the Christian faith that he introduced. That collection is called the New Testament.

It begins with four biographies of Jesus woven together with some of his most important teaching. Those biographies are called the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The story of the birth of Jesus is captured at the beginning of Luke's gospel.

We have copies of Luke's gospel available for anyone who doesn't have their own New Testament. Please grab one of these if you are exploring the Christian faith and don't have your own New Testament, or if you have a friend who is exploring it.

Just read it and talk together about the things that you notice and the questions that it sparks.

Second, we began by talking about friendship with God.

Certainly you've noticed that your Christian friend is different. Talk to your friend about his or her friendship with God, and the difference that Jesus has made in their lives.

And third, walk with us through this series. Wrestle with us with these great questions that lie at the heart of the Christian faith:

Who is that knocking on the door?
Why is he knocking?
Why doesn't anyone seem to be answering?
Why is he so persistent in his knocking?
What it might mean to open the door to him?