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Christ the King

Colossians 1:1-20

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In one of his books, Presbyterian pastor and beloved author Frederick Buechner poses a thought experiment: what would happen if all of a sudden one night God were to rearrange the stars so that they spelled out to the earth below, *“I REALLY EXIST”*? He imagines that many people would see this sentence in the night sky and immediately fall to their knees – as he puts it, *“not because they are especially religious people but just because it might seem somehow the only natural thing to do under the circumstances.”*¹ Others, he imagines, would run back into their houses in terror – the guilty ones, he writes, *“in terror of judgment”*; and the sophisticated ones *“in terror at the stark and terrible simplicity of it . . . and maybe in everyone some degree of terror at just the sheer and awesome vastness of the Unknown suddenly making itself known.”*

He also imagines that there would be a great many tears of regret being shed – *“people thinking that if only they had known it before, what different lives they might have had.”* In others perhaps there would be an upsurge of hope – *“the sick old man lying in bed where he cannot sleep and looking up through his bedroom window . . . there in the sky he sees proof at last of a reality beyond time.”* He even imagines what he calls the “peculiar astonishment” of preachers and theologians – surprised by their own surprise that they were right all along. He imagines that in the weeks to follow the world would rapidly become a very different place – churches would be full to overflowing, wars would cease, crime would stop, *“a kind of uncanny hush would fall over the world.”*

But then, as he projects his imaginary scenario several years out into the future, he imagines that a different sort of reaction would eventually begin to settle in. That even if God were to vary the display each night to keep it fresh – perhaps using different words or different languages, or even jazzing the whole thing up with bright colors, shooting stars, and celestial music – still, eventually a sort of indifference would eventually begin to take over. After all, we human beings are quick to adapt to changing circumstances, as well as easily bored by the familiar. And so he imagines that one night an innocent child might be overheard giving voice to the sort of questions many might by now be thinking, but afraid to give voice to. This child turning to his father and speaking words that cause the angels in heaven to gasp in surprise and alarm: *“So what if God exists? What difference does that make?”* In Buechner’s imagination, at that very moment: *“In the twinkling of an eye the message would fade away for good.”*

It's a wonderful thought experiment, isn't it? And I think that deep down most of us would be thrilled were it to happen – God writing in the sky in confirmation of the choice we have made to believe, in confirmation of the Christian life we have been trying to live. Confirmation, above

all, of the truth of what we know right now only through faith, not by sight. But I would contend that all of this is something more than a mere thought experiment – much, much more. For I believe that God has already done just this, once upon a time. That He did just this on that night when He caused a star of special beauty and brightness to shine over a little village called Bethlehem.² For what else could that star represent other than God announcing to the earth, “*I REALLY EXIST!*” Granted, not many people read the message of that star correctly, if at all – according to the Bible, mainly only a few shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night and a handful of wise astrologers in the east. But what else was the meaning of that Bethlehem star? And I think we can go even further than that – that God actually writes the message of His existence to us in the stars every single night, if only we would learn how to decipher that message. The Psalmist certainly knew:

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?*³

But, going back to that Bethlehem star and Buechner’s thought experiment, I would also contend that on that night God not only lit up the sky with the message, “*I REALLY EXIST!*”, but that also, that same night, He began providing for us the answers to those follow-up questions Buechner places in the mouth of that child – “*So what if God exists? What difference does that make?*” By sending His Son into this world on that night – born of a virgin, laid in a manger – God wasn’t just telling us that He really existed, but was also telling us who He really is and what He is really like. He was telling us exactly of the difference He intended to make in this world and in our lives from that night onward until today, and beyond today into eternity. The real story ends not with the heavenly message going away, but with the light shining in the darkness ever brighter year by year, and the darkness never able to extinguish that heaven-sent Light.⁴

“*He is the image of the invisible God,*” Paul writes to the Colossian Christians. That child born on that Bethlehem night was none other than God Himself in human vesture. “*He is the image of the invisible God.*” That child, that God-man named Jesus, is nothing less than the invisible God made visible to all on earth. Nothing less than the character and personality of God made readily readable by mortal minds. Nothing less than the One in whom “*the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*” – even within the limitations of this temporal plane – the Word having become flesh and dwelling among us, enabling us to see His glory with unveiled eyes. “*He is the image of the invisible God*” – meaning that when we look at Jesus, His life and character, we are seeing exactly what God is really like. Jesus is the answer to our question, “*What is God really like?*”

So, what do we see, what is revealed, when we look at the life of Jesus? We see One who has come to serve, not to be served⁵ – a God who dares to make Himself vulnerable among us and along with us, seeking not to lord it over us so much as simply to be in relationship with us, to walk and talk with us again as He did once in the Garden of Eden. We fear that God is always angry with us, that our sins have worn out His last nerve. Instead, what we see in Jesus is that His mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. Remember His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well⁶, His encounter with the woman caught in adultery⁷, His encounter with Zacchaeus up in

his tree⁸ – what we see in all those stories, and more, is that He feels compassion upon our brokenness, that He meets our failures with kindness and not coldness, that His capacity and willingness to forgive us far exceeds even our capacity and willingness to sin against Him. And we see that what He wants is to heal us and to make us whole. *“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”*

But, above all else, what He reveals to us about the nature and character of the God who exists is that God is love – and that He really and truly, even as undeserving as we are, loves us. That God is madly, unwaveringly, unendingly in love with us. That is the great truth about God that Jesus came to reveal – He said so Himself. He said that the reason He had come to earth was to show that God so loved the world.⁹

And remember also what He said to His disciples at their last supper together: *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his life for his friends.”*¹⁰ And, having said that, He went out and did precisely that for them and for us all. He dies on a cross just so that the great gulf opened up between us and Himself by our sin should be closed up again and forever. And why would He do something like that if not for the love of us? And then God raises Jesus from the dead so that death will no longer be the end of His relationship with us. Jesus rises from the dead in order to prepare a place for us in His Father’s eternal home¹¹, so that God can be with us, and we can be with God forever. And why would He want us around forever, miserable creatures that we are now, if not because of a love for us so deep, so broad, so strong, that it simply cannot ever be adequately measured by human minds? What is God like? God is love, says the life of Jesus.¹²

And it is that love in the heart of God for us which answers the next question, *“What difference does He make?”* That question of what God intends for us and for this world. And what is revealed in Jesus is that God, out of His great love for us and for all the creation He has made, intends to put all things right once again. Everything that has gone wrong, He intends to put right. Everything that has been broken, He intends to heal. Everything that has gone sour, He intends to make new. Everything that has gone missing, found. Everything that the Lord God has brought into being, recreated and restored. That is what God intends towards us, as revealed to us in Jesus Christ. He intends to bring the Kingdom of Heaven down here upon this earth. Remember how that was the very first thing He announced when He began His public ministry: *“The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*¹³ The Kingdom of Heaven come down and reestablished in all the earth, just as it once was in the days of the Garden of Eden, before the Fall. Again, listen to Paul’s words to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

That is the purpose of God in sending us Jesus. That is the great plan of God announced by that Bethlehem star. That is what God intends to do among us and in us and through us. And

that is what God is doing among us and in us and through us even now – for, as Paul writes, already *“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* What God intends to do, is even now doing, is to draw all things together, in and through His love, and place them beneath the reign of Christ the King.

Words fail me at the glory of this – this goodness of God, this astounding gift of grace and joy and hope which we, so undeserving, have so freely been given. Words fail me. So, I’m going to borrow words from another imaginary vision from another great Christian writer and Biblical scholar, J. B. Phillips. Some of you may be familiar with his beloved Christmas story, [The Visited Planet](#). In this story, a young angel is being given his basic orientation and training by a senior angel. At one point, as they stand looking out upon all creation, the senior angel points out one particular planet. He speaks with awe as he describes it to the little angel as the “Visited Planet” (which is, of course, Earth). But the little angel cannot grasp what this means, so the senior angel takes him back in time to watch this planet pass through the centuries. They behold this planet at its glorious creation, and then watch as it darkens through the ages of human sin. But then they witness something new and very different begin to happen in this midst of all that growing darkness:

The Earth went on turning and circling round the sun, and then, quite suddenly, in the upper half of the globe there appeared a light, tiny, but so bright in its intensity that both angels hid their eyes.

“I think I can guess,” said the little angel in a low voice. “That was the Visit, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that was the Visit. The Light Himself went down there and lived among them. . . . Open your eyes now; the dazzling light has gone. The Prince has returned to His Home of Light. But watch the Earth now.”

As they looked, in place of the dazzling light there was a bright glow which throbbed and pulsated. And then as the Earth turned many times, little points of light spread out. A few flickered and died, but for the most part the lights burned steadily, and as they continued to watch, in many parts of the globe there was a glow . . .

“You see what is happening?” asked the senior angel. “The bright glow is the company of loyal men and women He left behind, and with His help they spread the glow, and now lights begin to shine all over the Earth.”¹⁴

The Kingdom of God, coming on earth as it is in heaven. And Christ the King.

That’s what that star shining over Bethlehem long ago revealed – that God is love and that Christ is King and that all things are even now being reconciled and restored and made new. Indeed, for those who have eyes to see and hearts ready and open to receive the truth, that is the message the stars proclaim to us each and every night – the great Good News of the Gospel. The Good News that God is love, and that Christ is King, and that even now we are being delivered

from the domain of darkness and transferred into the great eternal light of the Kingdom of God's beloved Son.

¹ This quote and those following, Frederick Buechner, "Message in the Stars," in Secrets in the Dark (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), pp. 16-21.

² Matthew 2:1-12.

³ Psalm 8:3-4.

⁴ John 1:5.

⁵ Matthew 20:28.

⁶ John 4:1-42.

⁷ John 8:1-11.

⁸ Luke 19:1-10.

⁹ John 3:16.

¹⁰ John 15:13.

¹¹ John 14:2-3.

¹² I John 4:7-21.

¹³ Mark 1:14-15.

¹⁴ Quoted in Philip Graham Ryken, Exodus: Saved for God's Glory (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), pp. 842-843.