

“You Asked for It – Part 2: God In the New Testament”

**A Sermon by Richard Clewell
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Scriptures: Romans 1:16, 17; Mark 12: 28-34

Two Sundays ago we observed the nature of God as presented in the Testament or Covenant which we Christians call the Old Testament. We were interested in determining the various descriptions of this God and comparing them with the depictions offered in the New Testament. Are the perceptions different? Is this one we worship the same God? Why is looking at this issue important anyway? As you recall our perusal of the divine revelation to the nation of Israel was summarized in Psalm 145 where we found the following characteristics highlighted: God is indescribably great as one who creates and rules over all humanity and the world; this God is a present reality and desires and makes possible an on-going relationship with humanity; God is faithful and keeps promises and covenants; God is loving, gracious, forgiving, and shows mercy; God is a liberator from alienation and exile and transforms human life and meaning; and God desires the covenant people to represent God’s kingdom way to the dominant culture and as a witness to the nations.

And so we now turn to the on-going revelatory experience of God as it is described in the writings of the New Testament. It is important to note that the gospel accounts directly deal with the continuing history of Judaism under the domination of the Roman Empire. The Mosaic Law is still followed and the worship center is the Temple in Jerusalem. The earliest synoptic Gospel Mark, as well as the other gospels, relate that into this time and place appears Jesus of Nazareth who is baptized in the Jordan river and declared to be God’s son, the revelation of the holy one in human flesh. Let us never forget he is born a Jew and teaches and models the way of the kingdom of God as depicted in the Old Testament. He knows the Law and is faithful to the teachings of Judaism. In our gospel text his interchange with one of the scribes is most revealing. (Read Mark 12: 28-34) This scribe in response to the debate Jesus was having with the Sadducees, asks him which commandment is most important. Jesus’ response (v. 29-31) brings the affirmation of this teacher of the Law with the insight that these truths are far more important the entire Judaic sacrificial system. Jesus confirms his understanding and acknowledges he is in real touch with the reality of the kingdom of God.

Indeed, Jesus comes as the demonstrator of God’s kingdom in the midst of continuing human history. Even in his final discourse with his disciples as related

in John 14 he uses the same words as God identified Godself to Moses – “I am.” Jesus states, “I am – the way, the truth and the life.” Coming into relationship with God is fully realized in the qualities he expresses. He stands as the revelation of God’s kingdom way which the Lord’s created children are to identify with in faith and represent to the world system. He becomes the earthly translation of God’s nature and purposes for human kind and the creation.

Further, Jesus comes to epitomize the priorities of the way of the kingdom in his love for and championing of the alienated, outcasts, and strangers in his teachings and actions in society. Such instruction is seen in the Beatitudes of Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels. He “outs” empty religious institutionalism and the seduction of dominant culture. He acts with compassion and justice demonstrating God’s concerns for humanity and the creation.

This Jesus also demonstrates the ultimate degree of God’s love in his interactions with people in his ministry and in sacrificing his own life for others. “Greater love has no man than this – that he would lay down his life for others.” (John 15:13) In the crucifixion of Christ not only are people forgiven and set free from their burden of guilt for their wayward actions, but also their exile from God is ended and their connection and relationship with their Lord is restored. Christ’s resurrection becomes God’s act of new creation – the giving of new life to people of faith. John’s Gospel states, “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17: 3) Eternal life means to have an interactive relationship with God in this present life time and enables a fuller life with better alternative than the way of the current culture.

God’s love is revealed as inclusive and all encompassing as the Mosaic Covenant is expanded in Christ’s teaching and ministry, through his death and resurrection, giving new life and direction to all people of the New Covenant – both Jew and Gentile. Saul, a very religious Jew, encounters God in the Christ and becomes Paul the initiator of the good news to the Gentiles of Asia Minor and to Rome itself. It is Paul who declares, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Gentile). For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it written, “the one who is righteous through faith will live.” (Rom. 1:16, 17)

The love of God and of neighbor propelled those Jewish Christians, the early church, to demonstrate God’s inclusive love to the known world of their day. Desmond Tutu, champion of truth and reconciliation, in his book, “*Crying in the Wilderness*,” observes, “In the early Christian church people were attracted to it not so much by the preaching, but by the fact that they saw Christians as a community, living new life as if what God had done was important and made a difference. They saw a community of those who, whether poor or rich, male or

female, free or slave, young or old – all quite unbelievably loved and cared for each other, It was the life style of the Christians that was witnessing.”

And so it still goes on as this God reaches out through the faithful in love and forgiveness to the people of this earth. Do we fully understand such love? I doubt it. Kids again strike me as honest in their faith struggles. One junior high boy sat through a church school session where his teacher explained that God loved everybody in the world – all the time. The boy’s honest question came, “How does God do that? There’s just five of us at home and we can’t do it.”

In the New Testament the “God with us” presence underlying Israel’s faith experience and announced in Jesus Christ, takes on a further dimension with “the breath or wind of God” of the Old Testament Spirit becoming the indwelling Spirit which informs, transforms, and assists the faithful in discipleship. This Spirit is the change agent who enables a Christian to grow into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) and to exhibit the new life and fuller behaviors like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal. 5: 22,23) Therefore, the new life in Christ is not primarily just believing or being good but is a developing relationship with God that transforms us into more compassionate beings, walking in the way of the kingdom.

A final on-going characteristic of God is kingship for God’s faithful and the creation. This motif runs throughout the Old and New Testaments; from creation’s beginnings through Israel’s history into the continued journey of the faithful until this day. N. T. Wright, bishop of Durham, in his work, *Simply Christian*, writes, “The New Testament picks up from the Old the theme that God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to rights. Earth and heaven were made to overlap with one another, not fitfully, mysteriously, and partially as they do at the moment, but completely, gloriously, and utterly. - - - That is the promise which resonates throughout the Bible story, from Isaiah (and behind him, by implication, from Genesis itself) all the way through to Paul’s greatest visionary moments and the final chapters of the book of Revelation. The great drama will end, not with “saved souls” being snatched up into heaven, away from the wicked earth and the mortal bodies which have dragged them down into sin, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, so that “the dwelling of God is with humans.” (Rev. 21: 3) For these early Jewish Christians, the temple, Torah, and wisdom have come together in Jesus, God’s “son”, and, with that, the future has arrived in the present. In Christ it has confronted and defeated the forces of evil and opened the way to God’s new world where by the Spirit heaven and earth are forever joined, the future and the present interlock. It is a new way of being human – the cross and resurrection way of life, the Spirit-led roadway which anticipates the final consummation of God’s developing kingdom where all things will be new.”

A number of us at Fairmount undertook the study of the Revelation of John this summer. The apocalyptic vision with its vivid imagery was a real challenge. But the constant message John delivered to those seven churches in first century Asia Minor under the domination of the Roman Empire was clear. With the resurrection of Jesus Christ the fate of evil was sealed and the kingdom of God began its inexorable march toward consummation. The New Jerusalem exists now and is growing and includes all who are faithful to their God from Israel's beginnings through the New Covenant people who are faithful followers and witnesses to the good news.

What this means for you and for me as Christians is that we are called to be part of God's new creation, called to be advocates of that kingdom way here and now. We are called to model and exhibit that new creation in our relationships, in holiness, in service to others, in restorative justice for those the culture and world system ignore. "Christian holiness is not (as people often imagine) a matter of denying something good. It is about growing up and grasping something even better." (N.T. Wright)

The kingdom of God seeks to include all who want to participate in and contribute to its purpose, but it cannot involve those who choose to oppose its purpose. (B. McLaren) In our struggle to be faithful, we encounter choices. The bishop describes our battle well – "Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment. But new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day which is dawning. That quite simply, is what it means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God's new world, which the Lord has thrown open before us." (N.T. Wright)

Well, we have completed our whirlwind two week tour through the Old and New Testaments in search of the God who is presented. It would appear quite evident that the very same deity is presented in the entire story of salvation from creation's beginnings until the final consummation of history. This God has never been distant, has concern for all creation, has sought faithful relationships, has revealed Godself to the covenant people fully in human form and is renewing all things. God's love encompasses all peoples who can choose to be faithful and live an abundant life. May this very same God touch our lives in such a manner that we will respond in faith, obedience, and service to the living kingdom way.

Amen

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