

God Was in Christ

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All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

This morning we come to the one claim of Christianity that truly is unique among all the world's religions.

Lots of religions believe that God created the world, and the world belongs to God. All religions know that the human condition is deeply messed up in important ways and needs to be made right. Most teach some version of the Golden Rule, and lift up someone who serves as a model of what a good life should be. And most religions offer some solution to the trauma of death—either that the individual lives on in an afterlife, or else there's some sort of Nirvana, where the enlightened person is absorbed again into Brahman or the Ground of Being, the way a drop of water gets absorbed when it falls into the ocean.

All religions, including Christianity, talk about those things because they're the kinds of things thoughtful people care about. That's one reason we have more in common with people of other faiths than we might imagine. What makes Christianity unique is what we have to say about Jesus.

We Christians claim that Jesus of Nazareth turns out to be not just another great teacher or prophet or role model, but the very Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Christianity says that God was in Christ reconciling the world

to himself, and if anyone is saved from sin and death, it's ultimately through Christ alone, for the simple but profound reason that Jesus Christ is the very Word of God, through whom creation came into being. This Word became flesh and dwelt among us, as John's gospel says, and that's who Jesus is.

Lots of things follow from this one great claim.

First, it means that God is personal. Not a guy in the sky, not a literal man who sits somewhere up above the clouds, but a person in the sense of someone who loves and acts and has a will about the way things ought to be. God is not just an impersonal force, like the laws of nature that operate without any purpose or intentionality. Some people think that's a more sophisticated way to imagine God, often because they're reacting against naïve notions of God as "the man upstairs." But maybe their idea of God is not sophisticated enough. God is "spirit," as the Bible says, which is a poetic way of saying that God is everywhere at once, like gravity, and yet God has qualities that we recognize as personal. That's why God can become a human being in Jesus Christ, and Jesus can pray to his Father in heaven and call him "Abba," a term of great tenderness and personal affection.

Then again, the Christian claim about Jesus means that God has not just set the world in motion and gone golfing in some other universe, unconcerned about what happens here. On the contrary, God is so engaged in our world that God became one of us, by way of showing us the depth and breadth of God's love for us.

To say that God became one of us is to say that God knows all about our human condition because God in Christ

has experienced it. God knows a baby's cry, because little baby Jesus cried. God knows how important parents are, since Jesus had earthly parents who helped him grow "in wisdom and in stature," as the gospel says. God knows what temptation is, because Jesus himself was tempted in the wilderness. Jesus knew real, powerful temptations of the kind that you and I know, and the only difference between Jesus and the rest of us in that respect is that he did not give in to his temptations.

The most compelling part of God's identifying with us in a personal way is that God in Christ knew what suffering is. The greatest complaint people have about God, and the biggest barrier to belief for many people, is the problem of pain. If God is personal and God is good, they say, why is there so much suffering in the world? Lots of people take the pervasiveness of suffering as evidence that there is no God, or if there is a God, he doesn't care very much about what happens to the likes of us.

But God knows what suffering is, because God in Christ suffered in all sorts of ways. He suffered the frustration of watching people do things they shouldn't do and fail to do the things they should. He suffered the disappointment of seeing his own disciples behave in all sorts of unseemly ways, and how they were slow to recognize who he was, in spite of all the things they saw him do. Jesus suffered betrayal from his inner circle, and denial by the very man he chose to be the leader of his church when he was gone.

And of course, Jesus suffered one of the most agonizing executions ever devised by the human race he came to save, and his suffering was compounded by the injustice that he had done nothing wrong to deserve it. Most

terrible of all, besides the physical, emotional, and moral suffering, Jesus knew the deep spiritual suffering of feeling that, near the moment of his death, even his heavenly Father whom he loved and served had abandoned him. Was there ever a more pitiful cry in all of history than the one that came from the cross of Christ: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But if God was truly in Christ, as God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, then as someone has said, it is the cross of Christ that makes God credible in the face of human suffering.

To say that God was in Christ, then, is to say that there is a God after all, and God is personal. This personal God cares for humankind, and knows the things we go through, our pain as well as our joy, because God has experienced those things himself in Jesus Christ. There is no limit, in fact, to how far God will go on our behalf, and the life and death of Jesus show us that it’s true.

Now if death was the last word in Jesus’ story, it might be another inspiring tragic tale, but it would hardly make much difference in the way we live. There have been lots of tragic heroes in the world, but they all died, and in that sense they hardly offer much hope for the rest of us. But death is not the last word in Jesus’ story. He was crucified, dead, and buried, as the Apostles’ Creed says, but on the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, to the right hand of God the Father, as the Creed symbolically tells us. And then Jesus is able to fulfill what he predicted in John’s gospel: “Because I live, you also will live.” In the Revelation of John, the risen Jesus says, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”

God was in Christ, identifying with the human condition, sharing our joys and also our sorrows, all the way to death upon a cross, but then rising again to conquer sin and death, and restore within us the image of God, in which we were made to live.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. What a grand and sweeping a claim that is! And notice that it isn't just the church that Jesus came to save. God was reconciling the *world* to himself. In fact, the New Testament says it isn't even human beings alone that God is working to redeem in Christ, but creation itself. As the letter to the Colossians say, "all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." In the end, Christ will make not only us, but all things, new.

We'll say more about that later on, but for now it's enough to point out that Jesus was not just a good man, as if the gospel writers got carried away by making him in some sense equal to God. Almost everything we know about Jesus comes from the documents of the New Testament, and they tell us that they're simply reporting what people saw Jesus do, and heard him say, and the powerfully transforming impact he had on their lives.

The gospel writers tell us that what got Jesus in trouble with the religious leaders of his day, and ultimately got him crucified, was precisely the fact that he talked and acted as though he was in some way equal with God. They thought that was blasphemy, and they would have been right if Jesus was not who he claimed to be.

It's true that the gospels were written in final form a generation or two after Jesus died, but they draw upon

eyewitnesses who walked with Jesus and heard what he said and saw the amazing things he did. Meanwhile, the letters of Paul were written within a couple decades of Jesus' life and death, and already they make claims like "He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together, and "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things." None of what we read in the New Testament would have been written if his disciples had not claimed to have seen the risen Lord, and if people like Paul, who did not know Jesus before he died, had not also met him afterwards and had their lives transformed by that encounter.

So this third basic claim of the Christian faith is the one that's utterly unique and absolutely central to the rest of our worldview. Like people of other religions, we believe that the world was made by God and everything belongs to God, so that we are not ultimately owners of anything but only stewards on God's behalf. We also believe, with many others, that things are deeply out of joint in the human situation, and we all fall down in a condition called sin. But then we believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—that this man called Jesus of Nazareth turns out to be the one through whom everything was made and in whom all things will ultimately be redeemed. That's the part of our worldview that is uniquely Christian, and it's the source of our greatest hope.

There's more to say about all this, of course, including questions like, What about people of other faiths? What do we make of their religions, and how should we relate to them? We'll come to those questions soon enough. An important thing to remember in the meantime, though, is that this God we know in Jesus Christ is a loving God, and that's the theme we'll turn to next.