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BETTER THAN A SUPERHERO
Colossians 1:15-17

A recent NBC News report indicates there has been a rash of thefts of the baby Jesus from nativity displays recently. Laurie's reaction to that news was characteristic of her. She's optimistic at heart, so she said, "well, maybe all those people are feeling a need to get Jesus in their lives." I suspect that's not the motive, and if it is that is most definitely not the right way to accomplish that. However, one bright side is that there is a business opportunity out there for aspiring entrepreneurs. This appears to be a growth industry. It is in the area of security for holiday items. Specifically security for the baby Jesus in nativity displays. A number of companies are now producing products designed to thwart the thefts of the baby Jesus. In Eureka Springs, Arkansas, thieves stole not only the plastic baby Jesus from a nativity display but also the chain and concrete block it was anchored to as protection against possible theft, so clearly another method of protection is needed. The new approach came into play in an incident that occurred in Wellington, Florida. The life sized ceramic baby Jesus was stolen from a display in front of a community center. Police went directly to an apartment where they found the figurine in the possession of an 18 year old woman. A GPS device that had been planted inside the figurine directed them. It's a sort of Lojack for Jesus.

When I worked at a grocery store while I was in graduate school I had occasion to chase some people who were attempting to steal a Christmas tree from the store. I was appalled that someone decided to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ by *stealing* a Christmas tree. Doesn't that seem more than a little incongruous? It's even worse to steal the baby Jesus from a nativity scene. Can you get any more wrong? And yet, it is the perfect crime for our culture, which has almost totally stolen Jesus from the Christmas scene. This week we observe our nation's greatest holiday. We can talk about happy holidays and season's greetings, but in the end everyone knows, no Jesus, no holiday. How many babies have been born in the history of the human race? That number is estimated to be around 108 billion. All of those billions are precious, so why should we have such a titanic celebration over the birth of just one of them? That only makes sense if that one was truly unique, one of a kind. Today we are going to put the baby back in Christmas. We are going to look at who this baby Jesus actually was. Paul discussed this question in Colossians 1:15-17. Let's look at it together.

JESUS MADE IT ALL

Verse 15 begins by telling us that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Before we get into what it means for him to be that image of God think for a few moments about the idea that God is invisible. In John 4:24 Jesus said, "God is spirit." God is not a physical being. He exists as a spirit and therefore is invisible. John 1:18 says "no one has ever seen God."

The fact that God is spirit and invisible makes him incomprehensible at least to me. I can comprehend something that is physical but invisible. I cannot see sound waves, but they are physical forces that have physical effects and I can understand that. Because they are physical forces they have location. They exist in a particular place. Even at this moment in this room all around us are sound waves, television signals, radio signals and cell phone signals. We cannot see any of them, but they are physical realities. I can understand something of them, I can know that they exist in a particular place..

But when we say God is invisible, a spirit, not a physical being, that means he does not exist in any one particular location. At that my brain starts to explode. This idea can help me in one way. The Bible attributes to God three "omni" characteristics. He is omnipotent (all powerful), omniscient (all knowing) and omnipresent (present everywhere all the time). How can that be? Physical forces and beings always have location. The television signal for a local station is invisible, but it is confined to a particular locale. You cannot watch San Diego channel 10, for instance, in Meridian, Mississippi. Its signal doesn't exist there. But because God is not physical he is not subject to that limitation. He is everywhere always.

Unfortunately this is where my brain goes tilt. Everything I know I have learned through my physical senses. Then we come along and say, "but God is not physical." All right, but then where is he? Because he is not physical the question "where in the physical realm" has no relevance. Where implies he is confined to a physical location like a physical being. He is not physical, thus he is, well, everywhere. But I cannot comprehend a being who has no location and no physicality whatsoever.

This raises some questions for me. Specifically if God never was physical but only invisible and spiritual, how and why did he come up with the idea of a physical creation with physical beings? Why create something so different from himself that it cannot begin to understand him? Oh, I can answer that question with ease. Here is my answer: I have no stinking idea. God is infinite, I am not. He does things I

cannot comprehend, and I believe it is entirely possible that we will never really understand the answer to those questions.

So now we have a problem. How do physical beings who gather all of their knowledge through the use of their physical senses, ever gain any understanding of a spiritual being that is inaccessible to all of our senses? We might deduce a few things about him from the physical world he has made, but that won't be much. This is a problem given that the Bible indicates that God wants us to not just know a few things about him but to actually live in a dynamic relationship with him. This is impossible, unless God makes some way for us to learn about him and relate to him. Jesus Christ is the way God has provided.

Verse 15 says Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The Greek word Paul used there is *eikon*, the source of our word icon. The word can mean a representation. A photograph is one form of representation of a person. If Laurie and I meet someone new and they ask about our kids we can show them photos of them. That would give them a sense of how old they are and what they look like, but that's all. They would have no idea of what kind of people they are. You wouldn't know if they are shy or outgoing, relaxed or uptight, you wouldn't know what their interests are, whether they have a good sense of humor or anything else.

Is that what Paul means when he says Jesus is the image of the invisible God? Is he kind of a snapshot of this mysterious being? As it turns out the Greek word Paul used here also was used to mean an exact representation. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. II, p. 389), says that for the ancient Greeks in this sense the word "has a share in the reality. Indeed, it is the reality." It goes on to say it is "the illumination of (the) inner core and essence" of the object it represents. This kind of use of the word can be found in Plato, Philo and other philosophers.

If this is the way Paul was using the word then he was saying Jesus actually is the reality of God, he is the invisible God made visible, he reveals the very core and essence of who God is. But which is it? Is he the real deal or merely a snapshot of God? In verse 19 Paul wrote, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him." In 2:9 he states it explicitly, "For in Christ all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form." This is in total agreement with John 1:18, which says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Now that is a mind bending sentence, but you see the point at the end. God wants us to know him. We cannot sense him nor understand him, but he

has revealed himself in a form that we can actually know and have some comprehension of by coming into this world and living as Jesus.

Many years ago when Laurie and I were living in a rented house in Encinitas I was alone at home. I was sitting in the living room next to the fire place. I heard some odd sounds coming out of the fire place. After it kept up for a bit I went over to see what was making that noise. I bent down and looked in and just as I did a bird startled me by flewing right by my ear into our living room. It zoomed around the room appearing to be somewhat panicked and confused until it finally settled down on the back of a chair. I walked over to the front door and opened it, hoping the bird would get the hint. It didn't. It just sat there. This began to concern me because I knew at some point that bird was going to have to eliminate some waste from its system and I really didn't want to have to explain to Laurie why there was bird guano on our chair. I also didn't want to have to clean it up. Very calmly and slowly in a nice, non-threatening way, speaking in quiet, soothing tones assuring the bird I only wanted to help it I walked toward the bird. My plan was to pick it up, carry it to the door and set it free. I didn't even get close. The bird resumed its frightened flailing around the living room, obviously certain that this huge monster approaching it intended no good. I said, "Look, I don't want to hurt you. I just want to set you free." It wasn't listening. I had no way to communicate my real nature and my intentions and to show the bird the way to freedom. I wished I could transform myself into some form that could help the bird out.

That bird had far better chance of knowing and understanding me than we have of knowing and understanding God if left to our own devices. So God found a way to connect with us, a way that I could not do with that bird. He did it by entering this world as a baby, living here as a human being named Jesus of Nazareth. To complete my little story I spend quite a bit of frustrating time chasing that bird around our house, but eventually I was able to sort of herd it toward the door, and as much by chance as anything it finally flew out the door.

To make sure we understand exactly who Jesus is Paul went on to clarify and said Jesus is "the firstborn over all creation." At that point the Jehovah's Witnesses get all excited. They say, "See, we told you Jesus is not Jehovah God. He is the firstborn of creation. In a family the firstborn is the first of the kids, but is obviously one of them. If Jesus is the firstborn of creation then that means he is part of creation. He is the first thing created." That makes sense, doesn't it? After all, in my family there were two boys, the firstborn and the new, improved version. But they're both kids. So if Jesus was part of the creation he was created by God, thus he could not be God the way you are claiming.

Hold on. It turns out that this term, firstborn, doesn't always mean the first one born in a series. In the ancient Hebrew culture that was Paul's background, to be the firstborn didn't just mean the one who came first in the birth order. It referred to a position. The tradition was that the firstborn son would have a birthright that other sons would not have. That birthright included the blessing of the father, a double portion of the inheritance and the leadership of the family. To be the firstborn was to have the position of being the head of the family.

We see this in Psalm 89:25-27, which refers to a future king of Israel. "I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers. He will call out to me, 'you are my Father, my God, the Rock, my Savior.' I will also appoint him my first born, the most exalted of the kings of the earth." If the firstborn can only be the first one born of a group that passage makes no sense. How can God appoint someone to be the firstborn? You're either born first or you're not. Unless the point of the passage is to speak of a position of authority over nature and other kings, a position that one can be appointed to. That is exactly what it means.

Notice that the passage says Jesus is the firstborn *over* creation. The whole point of this is not that Jesus is the first creature, but that he has the position of ruling over all of creation. So how do we know that Paul had the idea of Jesus being in the position of firstborn as the ruler over creation in mind rather than the first creature?

Paul used the term "firstborn" again in verse 18 where he called Jesus the "firstborn among the dead." In verses 15 and 18 you see both uses of the term "firstborn." In verse 18 he literally said Jesus was the firstborn "out of" the dead. He's not talking about position there. Jesus is not the ruler of the dead. He was saying Jesus was the first one to be dead and to be "born" or made alive again from the dead. He was the first to be resurrected, though many will follow. In verse 15 Paul did not say he was the firstborn "out of" creation. That would have meant he was one of the creatures. He said he was the firstborn "over" creation, meaning position.

There are a number of biblical reasons, but there is an obvious one right in this passage. Note the word "for" at the beginning of verse 16. Paul is explaining what he means by "firstborn." "For by him all things were created." Paul goes on to say everything, visible, invisible, in the spiritual realm or the physical realm, all of it, every single bit, was created by Jesus. He reiterates this idea at the end of the verse, "all things were created by him and for him." If Jesus were the first part of creation this means he created himself. Give that one a little thought. How does

something that doesn't exist create itself? Not possible. Paul is explaining what he meant by the term "firstborn" and his answer is not that he is part of creation, but that he made everything. There is only one Creator. It is Jesus! If you doubt that look on to verse 17. "He is before all things." Not "he is before all the other things," but he is before all of creation. He is the eternal one that caused all this to be here.

The point of all this is that this baby who entered the world 2000 years ago and grew up in ancient Israel, against all odds, was God living in human form. What a mind boggling idea this is. The idea stretches the bounds of credibility. But go back to my encounter with the bird in the living room. How is this invisible, spirit God, this incomprehensible being, going to be able to communicate with us what he really is like and bring us into a relationship with himself? He needed to do that in a way that we could understand and relate to, and that is exactly what he has done in the form of Jesus.

JESUS MAINTAINS IT

Verse 17 tells us that in Christ all things hold together. The claim is that Jesus, the man whose birth we are about to celebrate, is the one who keeps the universe running and ticking like a clock.

Think for a few moments about the atom. In the nucleus of the atom are protons, which have a positive electrical charge, and neutrons, which as their name suggests have a neutral electrical charge. Those particles are made up of even tinier particles called quarks. Quarks are unusual widgets. They come only in pairs and trios. One odd thing about quarks is that if you try to pull apart 2 quarks that are paired, you do not end up with 2 individual quarks. When you pull them apart the energy that binds them together converts to matter by the familiar formula $E=Mc^2$. The mass that forms is 2 more quarks, so instead of getting 2 individual quarks you get 2 pairs of quarks. That's just bizarre. Pull 2 things apart and you get 4 of them. Weird. It helps me when I struggle with comprehending how Jesus could be God living here as a human that I can't comprehend how things work at the nuclear and quantum levels either.

So to return to the nucleus, you have these protons there, all of which have the same positive charge. Imagine that you try to put the positive ends of two magnets together. What happens? You can't do it because they repel each other. The same happens with protons. So you have these protons all gathered in the nucleus of an atom. Why don't they fly apart? Why doesn't the nucleus of every atom with more than one proton just blow up? It should. Physicists tell us that that are two forces

that hold the nucleus together. They are the strong and weak nuclear force. They are stronger than the electromagnetic force pushing protons apart. Oh, all right. So the strong force keeps them together, but what is it? Uh, well, it's the strong force. In other words, they don't know what it is or why it's there, they just know that it is there.

Why don't you and I just float up into the air? Why do we stay on the ground? Given that the earth is rotating at a speed of 1040 miles per hour, why don't we instantly go spinning off into space? Many years ago when I was single some friends took me to a lake in Texas. They put me on an inner tube and proceeded to pull it behind a ski boat. It was really funny skimming across the water on that thing. Then they turned the boat in a circle which caused the inner tube to whip around at tremendous speed. I flew off, which was what they were trying to do. Here's the thing: it was going fast, but it wasn't going 1040 miles per hour, so why don't we just fly off into space? Oh, that's easy, it's because of gravity. Gravity is the force that causes things to move toward each other. All physical bodies exert a gravitational pull. Gravity is what keeps earth revolving around the sun and the moon around the earth. Gravity keeps the universe together. Gravity keeps our feet on the ground.

Fine, but what is it? Why is it there? Why do bodies exert this pull on each other? Uh, well, um, I guess we don't know. We know the strong and weak nuclear forces keep atoms together, we know gravity keeps us planted on the ground and the earth in place around the sun, but we really don't know what they are or why they are.

Paul tells us in the end it is Jesus, the creator of all things, who is keeping it all together. At every moment of every day every single thing that exists, right down to the atomic level, down to the nuclear level, is kept in place by the power of Jesus. His power is present in everything that exists. It is holding you together. It is holding the ground beneath us together. It is holding the atoms in the walls around us together. Were he for an instant to withdraw his sustaining power the whole thing would be...well let's just say the Big Bang we've all heard about would become the Little Bang. The laws of physics keep things operating in the universe in orderly fashion and make it livable. But why are those laws there? God is telling us it is because he put them there and keeps them in place.

JESUS IS THE MEANING OF IT

Now we get to some truth that gets personal. At the end of verse 16 Paul says, "all things were created by him and *for* him." Everything that has been made has been

made for him. We see the same message in Romans 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things.”

Do you create anything without purpose? Years ago after reading an article I got an idea for a story that could make a novel. I thought about it and came up with the basic outline of a story that I told Laurie about. She immediately liked it and told me I had to write it. It was a ton of work, but I wrote it. Very few people have read that book. That’s all right. I had some purposes in the book. I had a couple of ideas I wanted to get across to readers and I wanted to entertain them. But the main purpose in the book was to write it for Laurie. I achieved that purpose, so it was a success.

God had a purpose too. Jesus was the point of everything he made. It was all created to serve his purposes and bring him glory. This comes as rather unpleasant news to us, for we have lived since the moment we were born with the default setting that all of this was created for us. Now we read this. I was born for a purpose, but it is not my purpose. I was born for Jesus’ purposes. I wasn’t created for myself, I was created for him.

This shouldn’t be a surprise to us. Recently Anna texted me a picture and asked me if I recognized the person. It looked like my Dad, but it wasn’t him. As I looked more closely I figured it out. It was my grandfather when he was young. He looked a lot like my Dad at that age. That picture caused me to think about how quickly we disappear from this earth. I don’t think about my grandparents much. I don’t even know the names of my grandparents. In the space of three generations it is as though they never existed. Can this world really be about me when at some point I die and the world goes on without batting an eye? Can I really be the focus when my children will always remember me and my grandchildren might know me, but their children will have no idea who I was? Clearly this world is not about me. It is about, Jesus, who will last far beyond our brief existence. I don’t like that very much. I want my life to be about me. That’s too bad. I didn’t create myself. I’m just a creation of God. If I write a story do I have the right to have it go the way I decide? Of course, the author always does. And the author of life, my life included, has the right to decide the point of that life.

IMPLICATIONS

WORSHIP HIM

Julia Stager of Eternal Perspective Ministries made the point that we have lots of superheroes in the myths of our day and that sometimes we confuse Jesus with them. We must not do that.

Jesus is not Superman. Superman is a being from another planet who has super powers. He comes to earth and pretends to be one of us as he employs his powers to help the human race. Jesus does indeed have super powers, but he is not pretending to be one of us. He is fully human. He is one of us. If he were not he could not die for the sins of the human race. If we do not grasp this we will end up with several bad mistakes. We won't really relate to him because we will think he doesn't know what it is to be human. We will tell ourselves we don't need to be like him because, after all, he's not human. Hey it would be ludicrous to tell me to be like Superman. I can't. But Jesus is completely human. So it is entirely fair and good when God tells me to be like him. He doesn't tell me to have superpowers like he did, but to be the kind of person he is.

Jesus is not Spiderman. Spiderman is part human, part spider. Jesus is not part God, part human. He is fully divine and fully human at all times. Jesus is not Batman. Batman is a gifted human who is trying to set things right. This is the common misconception of many today. Jesus was a great man who tried to fix what is wrong in this world and paid for it. This passage puts that to rest. Jesus is most definitely human, but he is also the image of God, fully divine, the creator of all that exists.

This is who came into this world at Christmas so that we could know him. This is a truth so profound the angels are astounded. He is worthy of our adoration, our love, our praise. Revelation 5:11 tells us what is going on in heaven. Angels are encircling Jesus and saying, "Worthy is the lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and glory and honor and praise."

SERVE HIM

Why are you on this planet? Why does your life continue? Is it to impress other people, to be safe and avoid all pain, loss or disappointment? Is it to be successful? Is it to be happy? Is it to grab for all the gusto you can or to get as much pleasure as possible? Is it to be powerful and control everything and everyone around you?

I submit to you that you exist for a reason, and your reason has nothing to do with any of those things. You exist for Jesus Christ. Your reason for being is to serve his purposes and live for his will and his glory.

We tend to be like a kid who thinks all of the lights, the songs, the decorations and especially the presents at Christmas are about making him or her happy. Can you imagine a child thinking that? A child who thinks that is going to be insufferable

during the Christmas season and they will end up unhappy. Either they won't get the presents they want and pout about that, or they do get them and discover that the joy of them fades quickly and now they're left feeling somehow let down. Unfortunately all of us in this world are pretty much like that.

The world is not about us, it's about Jesus. That truth changes everything. In every event, every word we speak, every encounter, every relationship our purpose should be to serve Jesus.

TRUST HIM

At the end of one day as I was working on this sermon I turned off my computer but it didn't quit working. Instead a message popped up on my screen informing me that Microsoft was updating it. I don't know what it was doing. For all I know it could be installing some nefarious little cyber bomb that will cause my computer to explode so I have to buy a new one with all new software from...Microsoft. Or maybe they were planting some cyber spy to steal financial information from me so they can rob me blind. Or it is entirely possible they were planting some new update that will foul up every single program and file on my computer. It's not like they haven't done stuff like that before. I really have no idea what they were doing.

I just let them do it. I didn't think twice about it. Oh sure, you want to sabotage my computer and cost me a bunch of money, go right ahead. Obviously I let them do it because I trust them, seeing that Microsoft has always done everything for my best interest and whatever they do is always done well. You know, when you put it that way I have to admit that I am a man of remarkable faith, given that Microsoft has given me plenty of reasons to trust them about as far as I would trust a rattlesnake.

I trust Microsoft because they have updated my computer before and it hasn't seemed to hurt it. So what does that have to do with this passage? Do you realize that Jesus is sustaining the entire planet? Were his power not sustaining your life you would cease to exist in an instant. His power is present in every atom in every corner of creation. It is at work at every moment everywhere in your life. So the point is, if you can trust him with every atom in all that exists, do you not think you can trust him with the events in your life? He has proven himself and continues to prove himself every moment of every day. That is why we continue to be. Well, when you put it that way, you're right, I suppose I really ought to let go, relax, be at peace and trust Jesus with whatever happens in my life.