**REACHING FOR THE INVISIBLE GOD**

John 1: 1-18

Sunday, January 3, 2021 – Pollocksville

**Presbyterian Church in Canada minister Barry Robinson tells of a time when one of his friends openly questioned why any parent in their right mind would bring their children to church. To him, church is where people learn to replace rational thinking with believing in irrational things. It is where people switch a healthy sense of self-esteem with a crippling kind of self-doubt. The friend further argued that church is where people are taught to depend upon useless myths serving only to provide a psychological crutch for putting up with the difficult complexities of life.**

**After hearing this, Dr. Robinson asked him to reconsider his belief, and relayed a story of his recent return with a youth mission team from the mountains of West Virginia – very much like the Appalachian Service Project trips that our son Bryan joined during his Youth Group days at Garber church in New Bern. He shared with him about how the kids had expressed their faith in Christ by spending a week living among and getting to know the people who lived in the little mountain hollow where they worked – how they had helped build a house and done other repair work – how they had seen with their own eyes the reality of true poverty, and had come to a better understanding of what poverty is – and, perhaps most importantly, how these teenagers had come to believe that the people among whom they lived and work for a week were, in many ways, blessed by God and, in some cases, far richer than they were. And Robinson asked his friend why he would not want his own kids to have a church-experience like that? And the friend didn’t know what to say.**

**I think it would be safe to say that many – if not most – people don’t really understand Christianity. They don’t understand the church. And they really don’t understand Christmas. They get so caught up with stars and angels, with the commercialism that has taken over, with their own faith struggles, and with the occasional local manifestations of religion-gone-bad that they sometimes miss the whole point of Christmas. And what is the point? Perhaps the opening lines of Howard Thurman’s “The Work of Christmas” well describes the point: *When the star in the sky is gone, When the Kings and Princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins.* And there is great wisdom in those words, for, as we draw ever closer to the conclusion of the Advent-Christmas season, it becomes more apparent that the end of Christmas calls us to begin a new endeavor. Thurman describes it this way: *To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoners, To teach the nations, to bring Christ to all, To make music in the heart.* This is the work of Christmas that we are called to do.**

**Now, who in their right mind would be opposed to that? These are the very things that we long for in life. I would opine that if we would all make a list of the important values that we hold dear, we would discover that each of these values lie at the core of why Jesus came. You say you want to find your way through the royal mess your life has become? Jesus came to find the lost. You want to pick up the pieces from a disastrous relationship in which the other person shattered your heart into a million pieces? Jesus came to heal the broken. You say that your life is empty and you hunger for a more fulfilling existence. Jesus came to feed the hungry. You say that you are addicted to alcohol or opioids, or you are trapped in a loveless marriage because you long ago lost the desire, or you feel despair over memories of past tragedies which prevent you from having any sense of joy in your life. Jesus came to release the prisoners. You say you’re tired and burned out – frustrated by life and other people – and that makes you one big crabby pain-in-the butt to everyone you meet? Jesus came to bring music back into the hearts of people like you.**

**Our scripture for this morning is the beautifully written first chapter of John’s Gospel. To the lectionary writers, anyway, this only seems fair. After all, Matthew and Luke have had their turn at telling the Christmas story and finally John gets his shot at it. The problem with John is – well – John. He doesn’t tell stories – he gives speeches. He doesn’t preach 3-point sermons – he preaches 53-point sermons. He never does anything small – he likes to write things LARGE. Matthew goes back to Abraham; Luke – not to be outdone – goes all the way back to Adam. But John is in a class by himself. When he tells the story of how Jesus came into the world, he goes back to the dawn of time: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* In John, Jesus doesn’t just come into the world because of two people – Mary and Joseph. He isn’t just the Messiah Israel had been longing for and for which the prophets held out hope. He is the logos – the Word of God himself. He is that very part of God that reveals, that very part of God that speaks, that very part of God that makes himself heard.**

**This first chapter is full of big statements that are all worthy of a sermon. But our lesson is one of John’s many attempts at helping us personally experience the kind of faith that accomplishes the real work of Christmas – the kind that actually has a positive and healthy impact upon our lives and the lives of others. John tells us that the reason we miss out on this exciting kind of faith is because God has run into a problem with the world, and we have run into a problem with God. Listen to what John tells us in verse 10: *He was in the world, and the world was made through him, but the world didn’t know he was there.* Perhaps we would better understand this passage if it were personalized just a bit. Imagine John speaking directly to you: *God is in your life. You would not be you were it not for God! And yet most of the time, you don’t even know God’s there.***

**There’s a story about a journalist assigned to the Jerusalem bureau of his newspaper. He gets an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall and after a few weeks, he realizes that whenever he looks out, there is this old Jewish man standing there and praying vigorously. One day he went down and asked the man, “You come every day to the wall. What are you praying for?” The old Jewish man replied, “What am I praying for? Well, in the morning I pray for work peace. Then I pray for the unity of all people. Then I go home, have a cup of tea, and come back to the wall in the afternoon to pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth.” The journalist was moved by the old man’s sincerity and persistence. “You mean you have been coming to the world to pray for these things? For how long have you been doing this?” The old fellow becomes reflective and replies, “Maybe 25 years.” The journalist was flabbergasted. “You mean you have been coming to the wall every day for 25 years to pray for world peace and these other things? How does it feel? The old Jewish man replied, “How does it feel? Why it feels like I’m talking to a wall.” And maybe that’s how it feels to us sometimes. Like when we’re talking to God, we’re talking to a wall.**

**Evangelist writer Philip Yancey wrote a book in 2000 entitled “Reaching for the Invisible God” (and now you know where my sermon title came from). One of the important issues Yancey raises is the fact that we human beings have a difficult time relating to God because we can’t see him or hear him or all the time measure his response to our prayers. And so we develop this sort of cockamamie theology that God is “up there” rather than “down here.” This is why when we speak of the Kingdom of Heaven, we think of a place with clouds and harps – not of a present political reality that will be established right here in which the world finds peace, the poor are truly lifted up, and justice extends to all. We believe that God’s world is a lot different than OUR world. This is why we have so many jokes about people running into St. Peter at the Pearly Gates when they die.**

**One such story involves a man who heard that, when you go to heaven, you can bring one precious possession. And so, when he died, this man had the pockets of his suit filled with gold so he could take his fortune with him. And when he gets to the Pearly Gates, St. Peter asks him if he brought a prized possession. The man reaches into his pocket and pulls out all this gold. The angels burst out laughing, and St. Peter says, “You brought PAVEMENT?” – because, you see, the streets of heaven are paved with….gold. But the streets of the cities in which WE live are not paved with gold. Our streets are filled with potholes, and crime, and homeless people, and funeral processions, and people going to work, and COVID-19 restrictions, and life as it really it. But John wants us to know that our streets are filled with something else!!! God is here!!! Among us!!! Even though we can’t see him!!!**

**So what does God do to overcome this problem of invisibility? Look at verse 14: *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* The invisible God made himself visible to the world in the form of a human baby, who became an adolescent Jewish boy, who grew into a young traveling preacher who loved the loveless, forgave the sinful, lifted the lowly, healed the hurt, and spoke of a new Kingdom he is building bit-by-bit, piece-by-piece, and person-by person – not “up there” but “right here” on earth. A Kingdom in which, when it is complete, people WILL see God face-to-face, and in which life is joyful, and peace reigns, and justice flows like a river, and the tears are wiped away from every eye. And this young traveling preacher loved humanity so much, even though he was rejected and killed by us, that he used his own death as a means of destroying the sin that keeps God invisible to our lives. This is what the INVISIBLE God made VISIBLE in Jesus Christ. And this young man – the invisible God made visible to us – offers that life to everyone and anyone who will receive it. And this is all you have to do: COME AND MEET JESUS.**

**When you come and meet Jesus for yourself – and immerse yourself in his life, his teachings, his relationships, his story – you can’t help but change. Because when the invisible God becomes visible to you, you become God’s visible expression to others. And the words of Howard Thurman’s poem run true:**

***When the star in the sky is gone, When the Kings and Princes are home,***

***When the Shepherds are back with their flocks, The work of Christmas begins!***

***To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry,***

***To release the prisoners, To teach the nations, To bring Christ to all,***

***To make music in your heart!***

**As this New Year begins, may we all meet the invisible God by reaching out to meet the visible Jesus!! And may the work of Christmas begin – through us!!!**

**AMEN**