

PUBLIC JESUS

Exposing the Nature of God
in Your Community

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Chapter 1

TO BE A HUMAN BEING IN THE WORLD

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

When we focus on the cross, which, I see the cross as the center of history—everything before was leading up to that: everything after that is emanating from there—this is the center of history. As Jesus is breathing his last breath, the veil in the temple tears from top to bottom. One of the ways I like to talk about that is God is now not stuck behind a curtain in the temple: he is on the loose in the world. So, part of what it means to be a Christian is to figure out what God is doing and join with that.

This becomes a way of life, not a belief system. So Christianity to me is not simply a matter of beliefs; it's a being thing—it's a new way to be a human being. So I think seeing Christianity as a belief system sells short what it is that God is trying to do. What it means to follow Jesus is that you hold nothing back: you follow with your feet.

So the way I often talk about it is I'll say that we're meant to organize our common life together in such a way that we "image God" to all creation. When people look at us they see past us,

to the reality behind it, which is that God is the master of the universe. He's made everything. It's all his. We somehow get to play some integral role in his right ordering of creation—and this is what it means to be human.

So when we're asking the question what the world would look like if God were in charge, what would public space look like if God were in charge, you look at Jesus. If you want to understand what it means to be a human being, you look at Jesus. If you want to understand how to order our common life, how to enter into public space, we go to his teaching. We say, actually, this is it, and this is terribly impractical and makes absolutely no sense, and yet, it's exactly what we have to do and be.

One morning last winter I had just showed up at my office, and sat down at my desk to do my morning prayers, pray the Daily Office. I had my computer up, and I, for some reason I glanced over at my e-mail or maybe it made a noise that told me to look at it. In the subject line of this e-mail, it said, "URGENT PRAYER REQUEST." I was like, "Oh no, something bad has happened."

The e-mail said something like, "I just passed over this bridge, and I'm pretty sure I saw Wendy, this woman from our church, standing on the bridge with a woman who was about to jump off." And I remember thinking at the time that if God was gonna ever ask somebody to go stand on a bridge with some lady, it would be Wendy. She's this woman who lives with kind of a radical yes to the world. She's available: she has lived her life available to God. So, she had a broken foot. She had *just* broken her foot that week, and so she couldn't drive, and so her

husband, Tom, was taking her to work. They were going over this bridge, and she happened to see the woman on the bridge and just something looked off. She said, "Oh my gosh, Tom, she's gonna jump! That lady's gonna jump! Turn around!" Tom, he was watching traffic: he hadn't seen it, but he flipped the car around, they went back, and she hops out, broken foot and all, jumps over the guardrail, and goes over to this woman.

The woman, she can tell, she's distraught. By this time she's climbed over the fence, she is on the outside of the fence. There's nothing between her and rush hour traffic going underneath this bridge. Wendy starts speaking to her, and the woman is crying, obviously upset. So Wendy reaches her hands as far as she could through the chain-link fence and starts grabbing ahold of her clothing and saying, "You don't wanna do this." I mean, just saying the things that we would say to someone who's about to do this horrible thing. But what Wendy said that has always stuck with me. . . . She said at one point the woman looked at her and they locked eyes. She realized in that moment, "I just have to maintain eye contact." She kept just saying words to her, words of hope like, "You never know how things are gonna end up. You don't wanna do this." And the woman was sharing a little about what was going on, why she was in the state that she was in, and Wendy's holding onto her, and they're locking eyes.

I remember at the time thinking, that's what it means to be a Christian. It's that we lock eyes with the culture somehow. However it is, we're just available. She was just driving to work. She wasn't on the mission field. She's not a preacher. She was driving to work and saw some woman in trouble, and she goes

and she locks eyes with her and she holds on and doesn't let her do this awful thing she's planning to do.

Finally, the police showed up and a fireman in a harness pulled the lady off the ledge. But I think what lasts with me from that story is this image of locking eyes with the culture. Somehow this is part of what it means to be a disciple. We're obligated, and so we grab ahold of people and lock eyes with them, and we try to speak words of hope. When the rest of the world speaks, or lives, desperation and meaningless and death and destruction and what does it all mean, we speak hope, we speak resurrection, and that this somehow changes reality.

COMMENTARY

You woke up in the world. That's how it all started for you.

You did not choose to wake up in the world. You did not mean to.

You did not generate your own existence. Nor did you plan it.

You simply woke up here. You came alive. One day, probably when you were very young, you realized you are indeed alive; you consciously named the awareness that you are living here in the world.

From the beginning of time, human beings have held this one essential reality in common—we know that we are alive and living in a world we did not make. From the moment when we each wake up in the world, every thought and word, every action and reaction, every interaction and observation, every prayer and sigh, every fear and triumph, every kiss and

joyful embrace, every moment great and small is an attempt to reconcile ourselves to our own existence. We are here, and we are all trying to make sense of our own lives. Why did we wake up here? Who called us into being, and for what purpose?

Our lives comprise the living out of our answer to that one profound and inescapable question: Why did I wake up here in the world? Much human angst comes from a dark suspicion that we can never truly find out the answer to that question. At one time or another, most people wrestle with this nagging fear that we toil in vain, without any purpose, without any guide, without any way to understand what it all means.

Telling the Right Story

The conversation about the origin and meaning of human existence never stops, although many of us stop thinking about it long before the issue is decided for us personally. For those who carry on the conversation, there are many approaches from which to choose.

The scientist begins the discussion with a big bang. The primordial stew. Electrical charges create amino acids that give rise to ever-evolving forms of life, constantly increasing in complexity over billions of years.

The philosopher considers the nature of truth. What does it mean to be human? How do we know what we know? Philosophers trace the development of thought and meaning, typically ending in either a hopeless sense of meaninglessness or in a hedonistic self-gratification.

So what does the Christian say? Christians take a different tack. We have been taught to engage this discussion in a peculiar way. We tell a story.

It's an odd thing to do, I'll grant you. Nevertheless, it's what we've always done. We tell a story. It's an ancient story that came to us in the form of a poem—told and treasured, memorized and repeated across generations until finally it was written down in a book we call Genesis. This book contains our beginnings.

This story tells us that we did *not* just wake up in the world by accident. On the contrary, we awoke in a world that was created by God. This world is evidence that we are not meant to experience God in a vacuum, but we are meant to experience God here in the place in which we came to life, choking and gasping for air, crying out and struggling to survive, aching to make our time on the planet mean something.

The story tells us that all along the way our creator has been trying to teach us what it means to be human, and this is why we were created. The story can help us understand how we can all live in accordance with ultimate reality as God has imagined it, as God has created it.

And the story goes like this.

*The Triune God is,
has always been,
and will always be.
From the beginning of time,
from before time began . . .
God is.*

This God exists as three-ness in one-ness—a plurality that is one, which exists in a permanent, ecstatic outpouring of love.

One day this love found expression. Creation!

And the three-ness in one-ness said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion” (Genesis 1:26, *NRSV*). That’s how it started. Humanity was ordained with a certain privileged status among all the rest of creation. Humans were granted limited power and given limited responsibility to rule over the earth—to be God’s image-bearing creatures.

Then the three-ness in one-ness said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28, *NRSV*). So that the image bearing didn’t stop with the first two humans, we were asked to fill the entire planet with other image-bearing humans. We have been created with our own ability to create and to procreate.

Finally, God puts human beings in a garden “to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15, *NRSV*). The human job description includes a specific obligation to the planet: we are its *keepers*. Our dominion is never to be exploitative because part of imaging God involves the care of creation itself. We are stewards who work with the dirt, with all matter, for that matter, and to help it to bear the fruit that sustains life.

That’s our story. Well, that’s part of it, anyway.

Humans were endowed by our creator with our own creative potential to fill the earth and bring it under our leadership, to till it and keep it, to care for it, and to cause it to bear fruit. When we are looking for answers about where we came from, and why we are here, this is the story Christians have been taught to tell. *We are placed here in the midst of God’s world in*

order to organize our common life together in such a way that we image God to all of creation.

As we bear God's image in every corner of the planet, we will help all the earth fulfill its intended purpose. It's an enormous vocation, and God has given it to us collectively as a human race. This is what it means to be a human being in the world. You see, we are not simply meant to chase our dreams, accomplish our personal goals, or get what we want out of life. We are not a giant collection of autonomous individuals. A big part of what it means to be a human being in the world is that we are born of and into a community. It means that we are designed by the Triune God to live together in community, in a particular way. We are to relate to one another and to all of creation in such a way that when people look at us, they can see that the three-ness in one-ness stands behind all of it, sustaining it by sheer force of will.

Now, humans have struggled with this vocation to say the least. We have stories to tell about that as well.

Sin filled the garden.

Then it filled the earth.

The human race was broken.

In the days of Noah, God decided to try to fix the broken cultures by destroying evil. So God found the one and only righteous human and stuck him in an ark with remnants of creation. The rest of the world would suffer annihilation. Like cosmic-chemotherapy. God would attempt to kill the disease before it killed the whole organism.

The problem was, Noah climbed off the ark, got drunk, and passed out . . . naked. The chemo was unsuccessful and God declared that the whole project

was flawed. Noah was still marked by a profound inability to make it happen—to bear the image. So God put his bow on the ground with no arrow in it and said, “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Genesis 9:11). Ever since then we’ve continued to strive, to toil, to attempt to make a dent in the darkness.

Sometimes we’ve succeeded. More often than not we’ve failed to image God, and there are times when it can start to feel like there isn’t any point in trying. But just when the time was right, something incredible happened. God entered in. What we could not do for ourselves, God decided to do for us.

This was good news for those who worried that the meaning of our existence would forever be just beyond our grasp. For those who began to fear we must have been left all alone to toil on the planet. For those who began to line up around their own agendas for how to bring the kingdom—holiness agendas, violence agendas, separatist agendas, and colluding-with-the-powers agendas—God entered in, as only God does, and started fixing it.

Jesus was God’s personal address to us about what it means to be human. This is incredibly good news. God has not left us to suffer here by ourselves, struggling to make meaning out of a meaningless existence. God has come for us in Jesus Christ.

If we want to understand what it means to be human, ultimately, we look at Jesus Christ. Jesus keeps us from getting lost in endless observation with the scientist or endless supposition with the philosopher. Jesus

draws us back into the story, helping us find the thread by connecting us to his mission of redemption.

Locking Eyes with the World

In the video I tell a story about my friend Wendy, who locked eyes with a woman who was about to jump off of an overpass into rush hour traffic on the freeway, and talked her down. I love this story. It's the locking eyes part that really gets to me. I think that I will never know a truer picture of what it means to be a Christian than my friend Wendy locking eyes with a woman who is on her last leg, desperate, and dying, literally.

Here's the thing. As Christians, we are called to lock eyes with the world each and every day.

The Sermon on the Mount from Matthew is the longest record of Jesus's teaching in existence. There he teaches with authority, explaining what it means to be a human being in the world. At one point he describes to his listeners what sort of impact they are supposed to have on public life. Eugene Peterson's Message version of this passage really brings the text to life.

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going *public* [my emphasis] with this, as *public* as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't

think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13-16, *MSG*)

In a way, this paragraph constitutes Jesus's updated teaching on the creation poem. “Let me tell you why you are here,” he says, and he describes our vocation in new terms. We are to be salt and light—salt to bring out the God-flavors of the world and light to bring out the God-colors. Jesus came not merely to prepare our hearts for eternity, but to set eternity in our hearts so that we can walk around with it—shining like a light, tasting like salt—and work it into every aspect of our culture.

To be a Christian is not merely a “believing” thing: it is a “being” thing. When Jesus invited people into his way of being, he asked them to follow him into public space. Jesus was not about building the church. He was about building the kingdom through the church. The church is not the end in mind: the redemption of the world is.

“We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill.”

Our faith is public.

Jesus is public.

“Salt and light” is the kingdom-of-God-version, or the gospel-version, or the Jesus-version of the original vocation introduced way back in the Genesis narrative. *We organize our common life together in such a way*

that we image God to all creation. We don't separate out into a Christian ghetto: we lock eyes with the world and shine a light into the darkness.

This is also part of what we are saying when we talk about "mission." Locking eyes with the world is about mission. Imaging God to the world is about mission. Our mission is to shine a light and bring out the God-colors. Our mission is to season the earth like salt and bring out the God-flavors.

When we organize our common life together in such a way that we shine like the light of the world, we will somehow be visibly, undeniably, rudely interrupting the world that has chosen to go its own way. The light emanates from a city, a community, not just individuals. The city on the hill shines and bears witness to all who are living in the valley of the shadow of death. The salt of the earth restores flavor for those whose life has become bitter and unbearable.

The life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ signal a seismic shift in the relationship between human beings and God. No longer is God stuck behind a veil in the temple. God is now on the loose and invading public space. And the church is the way God is now physically present to the world.

The church is to be the physical manifestation of the spiritual reality that Jesus is the world's true Lord. We are not simply content to be going to heaven when we die and to sit idly by while the world goes to hell in a handbasket. We are obligated by our vocation as God's image-bearing creatures to invade public space with the good news that Jesus is the world's true Lord.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the very first memory you have? Do you remember realizing you were alive?

How often do you think about the meaning of your own existence? Do you ever worry that life has no meaning?

How do you look eyes with the culture?

Is the vocation of being salt and light one that comes easily for you or with difficulty?

When you think of human vocation as bearing the image of God—being salt and light—do you find yourself resisting it, loving it, confused by it, worried by it, pressured by it, or something else?