

Friday, December 24th, 2021 – Christmas Eve
“In Your Face”

Titus 2: 11-14

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Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

If you've ever played in an organized sports league, especially as a kid, you know there's something that you do as a team after every game. You line up as a team and shake hands with your opponent. You may have just wiped the floor with the other team but it's not nice to rub their nose in it.

After all, who likes to have their faults laid bare before them? Have you been told... or said yourself... the following things? I told you so... This is just like that time when you... You always do that... Unfortunately, these kinds of lines are probably more and more common right at this time of year.

We don't like to remember our shortcomings. It's one thing to know we've made a mistake but it's quite another thing when the other party keeps gloating, reminding you of your faults, "I'll show you! In your face!" "In your face" is a phrase that shows disrespect, it's smug and ungracious. At least you can say this much – it's direct.

When it comes to some things, maybe it'd be better if it were more direct, wouldn't it? One common complaint lodged against God is that He isn't obvious enough. Maybe God should do something big, flashy, unmistakable, so we all would sit up and take notice and say, "Now that, that could nothing other than the one true God!" Maybe He could break in simultaneously onto every channel, every screen, every form of media and say something to us. Maybe an entire hospital full of people could be miraculously healed, or people around the food would all have enough food to eat. Maybe God should be just a little bit more in your face!

After all, God was pretty in your face at times in the Old Testament. Think of Moses – God speaking to Him in a burning bush. Think of the ten plagues in Egypt and God parting the waters of the Red Sea for people to walk through to the other side. Or how He led the people of Israel through the

desert, in the form of a cloud of smoke during the day and a pillar of fire at night, and how He would supply bread, just lying on the desert floor for the people to collect and eat. That's pretty in your face, unmistakable.

For all the time we spend looking for God, waiting for the flash and theatrics and pyrotechnics and special effects side of what God can do that we can miss the plain, ordinary, right in your face stuff that God does every single day – and not only that, but God came right out and told us, “Hey, here I am, and I'll always be with you.”

God's grace, that brings you salvation in Jesus has appeared to you. Appeared, as in, shown Himself. Look no farther than Mary for proof of that! She was quite aware of Him, before He was even born, as any mother here can attest tonight. But unlike the children you've borne, God came in Mary's face, through an angel, and told her that her Son was the Savior of the world.

You want to talk about a God who's in your face, won't let you forget what He's done? No one was more aware than Mary as she suffered in pains of labor – and yet, she was a virgin. And then here comes this child, whose face she sees for the first time, her Son and yet her God, face to face. Here I am, world, come to save! No wonder He is called Immanuel – God with us!

Why does this story fail to impress some people? You could argue it's because some people just plain don't believe it – and that's true, but I'm not talking about non-believers. Why does the story of God coming into human flesh fail to impress we who believe it? I suppose you could argue it's because it's been told so many times, heard so often, that we take it for granted – and that might be somewhat true. I think it's something else mostly though.

I think the biggest reason we don't look for God in the obvious places He says He is – like the Christmas story of God coming into human flesh, or God coming to us directly in water or bread and wine is this – God is being so in your face that we don't know how to handle it. It's very direct

communication, very obvious and as much as we crave closeness with God and closeness in our relationships with others, it's more comfortable to take God at a distance.

Look at the way our culture communicates – and I'm as much a part of this as any of you. We're an increasingly lonely and isolated culture. In a more global world, fewer of us live near our families. Technology helps us keep in touch with each other, but it also makes our interactions less personal. Anyone who has tried calling a customer support number has come up against the dreaded automated voice system right, that can't answer your question? We have social media, texting, autonomous, no-knock delivery through all kinds of gig-worker systems, sometimes even talk voice to voice in a phone call – but personal, face to face interactions are becoming less and less.

The deeper issue then, why the way God does things can be hard for us – it's too in your face. We sometimes completely miss just how real and personal God is being with us, expecting Him to resort to special effects and miracles and stuff “out there” because it isn't so real and personal. In a world where serious conversations are routinely turned over to technology because we're afraid of being vulnerable with each other, who of us wants to be that vulnerable with God, face to face?

Yes, it's a dangerous thing to come face to face with the living God. There are no secrets, there is nowhere to hide. He sees you for who you are – all parts of you. He calls us to be honest with ourselves, with our sin. He's honest in His appraisal of you and I have to tell you – that's pretty personal. That's pretty close to home, that's pretty messy, that's pretty... incarnational.

Incarnational means “in the flesh.” That's what God did in Jesus Christ – come into flesh and get involved in our messes, rolling up His sleeves and getting to work in the muck and mire of our lives. Yes, He was in our faces – but not to come and gloat – He looked in the face of sleazy tax collectors, traitors to their own people. He got in the face of adulterers and prostitutes – forgiving their sin. He got in the faces of sick people with horribly contagious communicable diseases and healed them. He got in the

face of evil, casting demons out of people. He got in the face of hypocritical religious leaders, leading people astray from the message of God's love.

And He came face to face with your sin and my sin and the sin of the entire creation. Coming into flesh, incarnational ministry, meant Him getting dirtied, too. He looked it in the face and made Himself truly vulnerable and suffered for it. And then He came in the face of death and Satan – only here, “in your face” means what we usually think it means. It was gloating, it was rubbing it in the face of His enemies, who He'd humiliated, who He'd beaten, defeated. The ultimate insult to those enemies – His resurrection from the dead.

And all that in your face stuff is what we celebrate here – God with us in Jesus. He didn't go to Heaven and leave us high and dry. In the water on your forehead the day you were baptized, God was in your face, promising you are His child and giving you an inheritance of eternal life. Jesus is in your face as you take His body and blood. God gives us each other in the Church to be faces for support and encouragement. And on the Last Day He'll look at you, resurrected face to resurrected face.

Indeed, we can rejoice with Simeon, the man in the temple who held Immanuel eight days after His birth – “My eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all people.” God bless you this Christmas. In Jesus' name, Amen.