

We See Jesus

See is an interesting verb—depending upon the context in which it appears, it conveys a variety of meanings. The dictionary lists twelve meanings; some being nuances of each other, but others describing totally different concepts. The simplest use refers to the ability to physically see something—that sense of sight by which we navigate our daily lives. A different meaning, and one often used within the Biblical narrative is seeing as indicating knowledge or understanding; indicating the comprehension of an idea. The narrative in the Hebrew Scripture is very clear that one does not physically see God. God speaks—out of a burning bush, out of clouds or in the case of Job later in that narrative—out of a whirlwind. But no one sees God’s face—not even Moses whose closeness to God caused his face to shine so brightly he had to cover it when he came down from Mount Sinai and walked among the Israelites. This presentation of God fundamentally does not change in the language of the New Testament where we read from the gospel of John 1: 18—“No one has ever seen God.” The reason Scripture speaks this way is because the God of the Biblical narrative is far beyond our ability to grasp or conceive—we cannot “see” God. Theologians speak of God’s transcendence, or God’s inscrutability pointing out that we cannot understand God. This aspect of God places a distance between us as we are the created being and God is our Creator. This being unable to “see” God—refers to more than one of those meanings used for the word “see”. Not only are there no physical sightings of God’s person, there is often an issue because we just don’t comprehend God’s ways. This manner of speaking about God refers to what is called God’s hiddenness and many of us aren’t exactly comfortable with a God who remains hidden. We long for a sign, something tangible that we can hang our faith on. We like to have explanations for everything; we want to know and understand every little thing and so we give everything that happens a cause—a reason why it occurs. And there is so much of what happens in the world that we just don’t understand. While much of the early narrative of the Hebrew Scripture seems to give us a fairly straight forward view of God’s nature—the overriding impression that many people have focused on and taken away from those texts, presents a wrathful, angry God whose response to the failings of the covenant people is to hand out punishment. We often overlook how constantly in those same texts God reaches out through the prophets to lead the people into living in community according to the revealed commandments. In those commandments God revealed a way to establish order and peace among people living together. It seems that the people rarely followed these instructions, but God kept sending prophets to remind them how they should live together. These prophet’s voices often promised punishment unless ways were changed. It is believed that Job was written during the Babylonian exile which is largely presented in the text as Israel’s punishment for covenant failures. About the same time there are verses in Isaiah which indicate that accountability for sin, those failures to show kindness, love justice and walk humbly with God is to become an individual matter—an accounting for one’s own actions and not one passed from generation to generation. The author of Job raises another issue about accountability which is often used to answer our question of why bad things happen to good people. These texts represent ways people have tried to “see” God in what happens around them. The book of Job begins much like a fable: “There once was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was a blameless and upright, one who feared God.” Of course when any narrative begins like that as we read it we know that it is a set up for

something—something is about to happen to this man Job, something out of the ordinary is going to occur; something major after which nothing will be the same for him. What happens in this narrative to this righteous man who is blameless and upright is total disaster in all areas of his life. The catastrophes which beset him come because of remarks made by Satan to God to the effect that Job is only righteous because he is blessed. So God gives permission for Satan to do as he will with Job short of ending his life. Having been given this go ahead, Job is subjected to extreme suffering. He endures the loss of his property and children as well as physical suffering. When given the advice by his wife “to curse God and die.” Job responds by telling her that is a foolish thing. Instead of that he asks, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” The narrative continues with Job asking why this has happened to him. Job’s response is the demanding answers of God, and eventually God does speak to Job, out of the whirlwind. The ending of the narrative yields no easy answer to the question of why, only the admission by Job that God and God’s nature is beyond his—beyond human understanding. Job still cannot “see” God. The writer of Hebrews describes this same situation we are still in this way, “we do not yet see God’s reign completed.” We look around and we do not see all tears wiped away, all suffering and sickness and pain and injustice banished from human kind. We do not see all things made new. But as the writer of Hebrews writes to encourage his audience, he says we do see Jesus. The opening of the Letter to the Hebrews begins with the distant past. “Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.” This communication describes the distance between God and people. But something different has now happened. Hebrews 1:3 tells us “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” The quote from John 1:18 which begins “No one has ever seen God.” continues “It is God the only son who is close to the Father’s heart who has made him known.” The first verse of the Hebrews letter continues, “But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” So while God’s kingdom and God’s salvation remain inscrutable to us, we are not left completely in the dark. There is, of course, much we do not at present see that we might like to see. We look like God’s reign to be more pervasive in our world. But the writer of Hebrews insists that “We see Jesus.” This is significant, because the basis for much of what Hebrews is about is the idea that Jesus is “the reflection of God’s glory and the imprint of God’s very being.” Hebrew’s author is speaking about incarnation, about the biology of Jesus’ origin. But in a very real sense he is also telling us something even more important and profound. What the text from the Letter to the Hebrews tells us is that through Jesus there is a way to see God. It tells us that Jesus really and truly does show us what God is like. We can look at Jesus, his life, his teaching, his mercy, his justice and we can be confident that we are seeing a true image of God. Or as Hebrews puts it: “the exact imprint of God’s very being.” Through Jesus we can also see God. And when we look at Jesus, what is it that we see? We see him embracing the ones nobody else will embrace. We see him confronting the religious people of his day with their self-righteousness. We see him forgiving sinners and restoring people to their right mind and good health. We see him teaching people to follow the commandments by loving God whole heartedly and loving others sincerely. In the passage from Mark’s gospel assigned to this day we see Jesus taking children into his arms and blessing them. In this gospel passage, Jesus says that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” God is both transcendent and immanent; God is both distant and near. God’s nearness is so close it is like the very air we

breathe. We need both aspects of God. That's why we look to Jesus. Jesus reminds us that God's love is so vast that we cannot possibly begin to conceive it. But Jesus also reminds us that God's love is as accessible to us all as the kindness and compassion shown by Jesus who freely gave of himself to all—even to dying for us on the cross. In a little while we will come to the Table which the Lord prepared for us asking us to remember him, to come and be restored in his presence, let us remember that in him we do "See" the true image of God and God's love and be strengthened and nourished there. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.