

The God of Thomas
John 20:24-29

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Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jn. 20:28

Our study of the nature of God as God is revealed in scripture turns today from the Old Testament to the New. Instead of lining out how God is portrayed in a Bible book as I have been, today's study describes how God is perceived by a Bible character. The New Testament character I put before you is Thomas, one of the twelve disciples.

Who is the God of Thomas? What is Thomas's God like? To see the God of Thomas you have to look at Jesus. Thomas saw God in Jesus. More particularly, Thomas saw God in the Risen Christ who lives today.

The God of Thomas appears at the heart of our struggle.

Throughout his time with Jesus Thomas saw that Jesus had a way of showing up to help people right at the very point of their need. They did not have to drag him into anything. He came to them. He approached the man at Bethesda, that lonely man with an impediment who had been coming unsuccessfully to that supposed place of healing for thirty-eight years (Jn. 5:1-9). He went straight to that tormented man of Gadara who lived chained among the tombs of that place half out of his mind because of the voices in his head (Mk.5:1-20). He went to that well in Samaria where a woman, burdened with a sad past and exhausted by life, came each day at an odd hour to avoid the crowds (Jn. 4:1-30). He went to the little village of Nain and joined a funeral procession where a grief-stricken widow was laying her son, her only child, to rest (Lk. 7:11-17). Jesus, Thomas saw, had a heart for all these people and was drawn to them to bring them help right at the place of their desperation.

Now Thomas himself is the one with a need greater than he can bear. He has heard distant rumors of Easter but his heart and soul and mind and strength are all back at Calvary. His is a Friday world dominated by a cross yet to be transformed into anything to sing about. Thomas's world is bleak with disappointment and there does not seem to be any hope on the horizon. The Jesus he knew and loved was dead, cruelly executed on that ugly cross. Thomas had set his sights on Jesus before that dismal Friday. Jesus was his all in all. Thomas had organized his life around Jesus. He had planned his future around Jesus. His vision of tomorrow was bright with the light of Jesus. But all that collapsed at Calvary. All that came crashing down at the cross. Jesus was dead and Thomas's hope was gone.

Beyond those feelings of disappointment, Thomas is feeling left out. His friends had come just the other day to tell him they had a new experience of Jesus. They told him something strange and wonderful was happening. But Thomas didn't have an experience like that. He wasn't being lifted out of his depression the way his friends were. Long before Fanny Crosby wrote the hymn, Thomas must have been praying, if he had any prayers left, "While on others

you are calling, do not pass me by.”¹ Thomas was feeling disappointment beyond disappointment and he was feeling left out.

Now that is just the place where Jesus appeared to him. We have seen in our studies so far that the God of Genesis can take hold of chaos and bring it into order, that the God of Exodus can break the hold of cruelty and lead to deliverance, and that the God of Isaiah can take a time of national crisis and bring about promise. Now that same God appears to Thomas in the form of Jesus right at the point of his doubt and despair, and delivers him into faith and hope.

The appearing, let us note, seems to be altogether outside Thomas’s control. This encounter with the Risen Christ we are seeing in the Gospel According to John is no séance. It isn’t something Thomas willed to happen. It isn’t anything the disciples created through some formula or liturgy or prayer. It happened at Christ’s own doing, but I think Thomas put himself in a position to experience the happening by listening to the testimony of his friends, gathering with the faithful, and not giving up. We can trust that the God of Thomas will appear to us, too, right at our place of need, and we will be in better position to notice that appearing if we listen to the testimony of faith, gather with the faithful, and never give up.

The God of Thomas carries the scars of life.

The Old Testament skewers idols as if by a scathing tweet. Psalmists and one or more of the prophets see people putting their faith in little figurines and saying the prayers to statues other people have erected. The Old Testament reduces that faith in idols right down to smithereens (Ps. 115:4-8; 135:15-16; cf. Is. 45:20, Jer. 10:5). Those statues have eyes, the texts say, but they can’t see a thing. They have ears but they can’t hear. They have mouths but can’t speak. They have feet but can’t move. The idols are lifeless. The idols are helpless. The idols are worthless.

Jesus appears to Thomas living and wounded. The living Jesus who comes to Thomas in his need is full of the scars of life. Perhaps you have known people, as have I, whose bodies bore the marks of what they had been through. One of my aunts walked with a limp because she fell off the silo when she was young and broke her foot. One of my uncles was missing a piece of his ear, shot off in the Philippines in WWII. One of the baseball coaches my brother had when he was a teenager had an artificial leg and was missing half of one of his arms. Somebody else had a face scarred and disfigured because of a terrible and fiery accident. All these people had been through something and understood pain. They knew suffering. Each of these people had their own kind of tenderness. They had their own kind of toughness, to be sure, but they all had a kindness not possessed by people who have never suffered.

So Jesus appears to Thomas as the wounded one. His appearing is all in contrast to the dead, lifeless, and aloof idols who have no way of identifying with or understanding anyone’s suffering and pain. Jesus, wounded in his hands, feet, and side, has reality about him. He has been through something. He can understand. He can sympathize. He can bring the gift of real commiseration.

¹ Fanny Crosby, “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior,” *New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), #551.

That woundedness of Jesus seen by Thomas is an open invitation to you and to me to turn our hearts to him knowing that he who has been through something will understand to the very depths what we are going through. We don't have to explain pain to him, or agony, or harshness, or loneliness, or any such thing. The God who comes to us in our places of need bears the scars of life which are the badge of understanding.

The God of Thomas enjoys sufficient power to accomplish the divine purpose.

The power of Jesus, of course, looks excruciatingly small. I don't know if Thomas knew the story of Bethlehem but he had the facts of Jerusalem. He may not have known about Jesus as a baby in the cold stable with the crude manger and the company of animals; but he knew about him as the broken man of the cross, the man who seemed powerless under the whips of the soldiers, the jeers of the crowd, and the mockery of his majesty. On that dismal Friday Jesus seemed the essence of weakness.

But that weakness of Jesus proved to be deceptively strong. How strong? Strong enough to defeat death. This Jesus who came to Thomas that Sunday after Easter had been dead but now he was alive. It was different than the way Fezziwig was alive to Scrooge in Dickens' story. You remember the scene. The Ghost of Christmas Past took Scrooge back to a time when the old miser was a young man apprenticed to a kind and fun-loving man named Fezziwig. When Scrooge saw the scene the spirit showed him he exclaimed, "It's Old Fezziwig, alive again!" But Fezziwig wasn't alive in the story. He was a shadow of the past, a memory made vivid.² When Jesus appeared to Thomas he wasn't a shadowy memory or some specter from the back of Thomas's mind. It was really Jesus. He was really alive. His weakness was strength enough to master and defeat the worst that death could do.

So the strength of Jesus in terms of today is still something strong enough to defeat the power of death. Death still happens. Death still comes. Of course it does! Only a fool would say that it doesn't. Every home and every heart has an emptiness in it somewhere where someone once stood who stands no more on earth. The mounting number of COVID dead is ghastly proof that death still brings people to the grave. But – and this is a claim of faith I cannot prove but know in my heart is true – death does not have the victory. Life wins, even in the case of the dead. Love wins. Love never dies. The Christ who meets us today comes with the power to defeat death.

And Christ has strength enough to bend toward justice that long arc of history, to borrow the phrase from Martin Luther King. Those who stand on the side of injustice are on the wrong side of history, the side that is destined for defeat because God in Christ is on the side of truth and justice and love.

The God of Thomas appears at the heart of our struggle, carries the scars of life, and enjoys sufficient power to accomplish the divine purpose. Put your trust in this God. Don't leave this God back with Thomas. Make this God your own through trust. Look to Jesus. Study his every feature. Trust that he can appear at the heart of your struggle, that he can understand

² Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: The Original 1843 Manuscript* (Delray Beach, FL: Levenson, 2011), p. 24, 20.

everything you are going through, and that he has sufficient power to win the victory for you, for those you love, and for all who live in fear in this uncertain time.