

“Recognition Failure: Stepford Gods & Spiritual Amnesia”

John 1:6-13

March 3, 2019

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

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Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter one, verses six through thirteen. Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

“⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Surely all people are like grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

[Isa 40:7b-8]

We come this morning to the next section of John’s prologue to his Gospel, and as we do we’re hit with a jarring claim that the Apostle makes here. It’s a claim that should shock us, and it should make both Christians and non-Christians uncomfortable.

In verse nine we read “The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” That connects us with the previous passage that we looked at last Sunday morning, about the light. It also mentions the coming of that light into the world, which we will consider in more detail next Sunday. In the previous passage the Apostle John told us that the true light is the Maker of all things, the Creator of the cosmos, the one who formed all things and all people (including you and me). Later in his Gospel John more overtly identifies this light as Jesus Christ. And now in verse nine he focuses us on the fact that this True Light came into the world. And what happened next?

Verses 10 and 11: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

John here identifies two groups of people who *should have* recognized and received their Maker, but who instead rejected him in a way that, if seen rightly, is sort of dumbfounding.

First, we read that when he came to the world that he had made, the world did not know him – they did not recognize him for who he was. John expects that to sound kind of crazy ... because it is. The Maker of the world came to the world he made, and that world didn’t recognize him when they saw him.

If you’re not a Christian, you might share one of the common your critiques of Christianity (or of belief in God in general), which is the common that if there was a God, and if he wanted to be known by us, then why wouldn’t he just introduce himself already? If that objection resonates

with you, John is kind of getting in your face in these verses. Because he's saying that God did exactly that. And when he did, the world failed to recognize him.

And if we think about it more, it gets worse. Augustine in his sermon on this passage points out that we need to hold two Biblical statements together as we think about this. Because here, in verse ten, the Apostle John says, "the world did not know him." But at the same time, the Apostle Paul writes that God had already made himself known to all people through the creation itself – that through the world around us, through his image written on humanity, through his image written on our hearts and minds, God had already revealed himself to the whole world to such an extent that, as Paul says in Romans 1:21 "they *knew* God" though "they did not honor him as God." Augustine points out that Paul doesn't say that the world did *not* know him, but that they *did* know him. So how does John's statement here fit with Paul's? Well, it fits because the world's failure to recognize its Maker when he came into the world was not due to any miscommunication. It wasn't that the world lacked enough information. And the Maker of this world did not show up in a disguise by which he was difficult to be recognized. Instead, the world's failure to recognize its Maker was a willful failure. [Augustine, *Homily 3.4*, p. 58]

There are many things that people find offensive in Christianity but let this one sink in this morning. The Christian Bible says that left to yourself, if the One who made you, who designed you (not just your body but your heart, your soul, your mind) – it says that if the One who designed both you and the world you live in, were to come up to you and introduce Himself, on your own you would utterly fail to recognize him, and it would be 100% *your* fault. What do you make of that claim? That is what John says in verse ten. It should make you uncomfortable.

Now, for the rest of us who are Christians, John does not let us off the hook. Instead he says something that should be even more uncomfortable for us.

In verse 11 he writes that God came to his own people, and they did not receive him. When he refers to God's own people in the first century, John has in mind the first century Jews. But like the verse before it, John is not just making a statement that was unique at one particular point in human history, but a spiritual habit that was true then and remains a threat today.

John is saying that God called a people to himself – his people Israel. And God interacted directly with his people for centuries. He performed miracles, he revealed himself in signs and wonders, he spoke to them directly and had his Word put to writing that they might have it from generation to generation. He drew close to them in the tabernacle and then the temple. He sent them leaders, and teachers, and prophets. He orchestrated their history in special ways. He gave them a superabundance of reasons to know him. And then, in the fullness of time he came to his people. And they did not receive him. They rejected him.

As with his statement about the world, this should make us feel a bit disconcerted. We should ask: "How could this be?" How could the very people God had drawn close to in history, who had his word and special revelation, fail to receive him when he came to them?

John here says that human beings on their own will fail to recognize their Maker, and that even those whom He draws close to in extraordinary ways are still at real risk of rejecting him when they see him as he is.

There is a question underlying all of this which is: How is this possible? How can this be? What is going on that this is the case?

Tim Keller, in a few different places, has made the case that part of what is behind this is our tendency, in both the world and the church, to make Stepford Gods for ourselves. [Keller, 113-114]

Keller's reference there is of course to the story *The Stepford Wives*. *The Stepford Wives* is a book that came out in 1972. A movie of it came out in 1975. There was a remake in 2004 (which I haven't seen) that was supposed to be pretty bad. The book and movie both have content that believers will want to be cautious about (just to put that out there), but both also set up a picture that, as Keller points out, is very helpful as we think about our relationship to God.

The Stepford Wives follows Joanne Eberhart as she, her husband Walter, and their two kids (Pete and Kim) move from New York City to Stepford, Connecticut.

As they settle into their new house, Joanne starts to notice some odd things about the residents of Stepford.

The men, for one, spend most of their free time at a local Men's Association. The women, on the other hand, never go out ... because they have no interests beyond housework. As Joanne digs a bit deeper she finds that the wives of Stepford, one after the other, have no interests of their own at all, no opinions of their own, no thoughts of their own. They do housework, care for their families, and agree with whatever their husbands think. What strikes Joanne is not primarily that they are focused on their families, but that they seem so two-dimensional. When you talk to them, they don't seem like real people.

Joanne finds two exceptions – a woman named Bobbie who'd been there with her family for just over month, and Charmain who had moved there with her husband a month before Bobbie. Joanne spends time with and gets to know both these women in the weeks that follow.

But then something alarming happens. A couple months later, after she'd been living in Stepford for four months, Charmain changes. Overnight, she becomes like all the other wives. Her personality, her interests, her own opinions, they all vanish. She devotes herself without thought to whatever her husband wants.

Bobbie and Joanne begin to worry that maybe there is something in the water – a chemical that begins affecting the women after they've been drinking it for about four months. Bobbie even starts buying bottled water. Both women begin looking for homes in other towns and trying to convince their husbands to move as soon as possible. And this continues until Bobbie reaches the four-month mark. At which point she too changes. And Joanne begins to panic.

Joanne is confused and suspicious. She begins doing research, looking through old editions of the town's local paper at the library. At one point she discovers that things weren't always like this in Stepford. The women used to be thoughtful and have interests and be involved in one another's lives. But then a few years ago, around the same time that the Men's Association had formed, one by one the women began to change. Joanne digs a bit deeper. It turns out the local paper would do a little write up on every new resident that moved to the area over the past few years.

She begins looking at the bios of the husbands who were now the leaders of the Men's Association. As she does she learns that they specialize in fields like computer engineering, plastics, audio technology and optical technology. Finally, she finds the bio of the president of the Men's Association, reading that he is a graduate of UCLA and MIT who had spent years working for Disneyland, deigning animatronics.

It is at this point that Joanne puts together that what the Men's Association offers to every man who joins is to replace his wife with an animatronic robot, who looks like his wife (though modified to the husband's specifications in certain ways), and who will then do whatever her husband wants, and agree with whatever he thinks.

Peter Straub points out that many people have misread *The Stepford Wives*. They've read it as a satire of women who focus on homemaking – and in a sense that's how the phrase “Stepford Wife” has entered our language. But Straub says that's a misreading of the story. That wasn't the point that Ira Levin, the author, was trying to make. It's the Stepford *husbands* whom Levin was satirizing – the picture of men who prefer a robot maid and concubine to a real-life woman. It is that tendency that Levin was exposing and critiquing. [Straub, “Introduction,” x-xii]

Ira Levin's novel obviously had some social and political messages. But it's a profoundly human tendency that he's pointing out: our desire in a range of relationships to prefer robots who always agree with us to real persons.

And Tim Keller's point is that we are frequently tempted to do the same thing with God. We desire a God who exists to serve only our goals, and who agrees with us about everything. And this is in some ways what lay behind the first-century Jews rejection of their God, and the first-century pagans' failure to recognize their Maker.

It's interesting to note that in *The Stepford Wives* a husband would commission a robot wife, who would take about four months to be made, and then when the robot was done, two versions of his wife existed. His real wife and the robot wife. The robot wife resembled his real wife in some superficial ways, but she had been gutted of anything that made her a real person. So, he had his real wife, and his custom-designed robot Stepford wife. And at that moment, he had to choose one. He would live with one, and the other would be destroyed. One would be received and the other rejected.

John will soon lay out that that is something like the situation the first century Jews faced. They had remade their God in their hearts and minds according to their own desires. They had remade him in their shared rules and customs and worldview according to who they wanted him to be. They had created a God who resembled their real God in many superficial ways, but who had been gutted of his own mind and opinions. *Now he agreed with them on everything. He liked what they liked. He hated who they hated. He never questioned them or disagreed with them.* He was their Stepford God.

But then, John tells us, their real God actually showed up. And like the Stepford Husbands the Israelites knew both could not co-exist. And then, like the Stepford Husbands, they decided that they preferred the imitation version, the one of their own design, to the real thing. And then, like the Stepford Husbands, they knew that if they were going to live with the imitation, the original had to be destroyed. “He came to his own and his own people did not receive him.”

And we get the impression in *The Stepford Wives* that the longer a man lived with a Stepford wife, the more he forgot what his real wife was actually like. When Joanne finds local newspaper articles about what some of the women had been like before they had been replaced, it's almost impossible to recognize them. As one spends time with the robotic imitation, the real thing becomes less and less recognizable. A sort of willful amnesia sets in.

And this gives us a bit of a picture of what was going on with the pagans of the first century that John writes about. As Paul said, in some sense they knew of God. But they had spent so much time with Stepford versions of God that when their true Maker showed up, they couldn't even recognize him. Even though they should have known their Maker by sight, this spiritual amnesia had set in, and when their Creator came to them, they "did not know him."

What about you?

Does your God ever disagree with you? Does he ever correct you? Does he have goals that are different than yours? Does he ever confuse or frustrate you?

If you never struggle to accept certain things about God, if you never find yourself confronted by him, if he never tells you that an opinion you hold is wrong, then one of two things has happened: Either you have reached a virtually perfect level of spiritual growth and maturity, so that your mind is completely conformed to God's ... or you have created a Stepford God.

If with delightful ease you find that your God holds all the same opinions and values as you do, loves what you love and hates who you hate, then you probably have a custom-designed God – not a real one.

Real people have their own opinions, interests, and goals. Every human being in your life does. And God is not less of a person than the human beings around you, but more.

Where might you be in danger of creating your own Stepford God?

And Christians, you are not immune to this. Having our minds conformed to Christ – so that our thoughts and affections and desires all line up with his – is a life-long struggle. It's a difficult process and is never completed in this life. And so ... if you don't have any parts of your life or relationship with God where those tensions exist, where you *know* your heart is at odds with God's and that you need to conform more to him, then like Israel in the first century, you may be in danger of crafting for yourself a Stepford God.

John tells us in verses eleven and twelve that such an approach to God, left unchallenged, will bring us to a point where, when confronted with the true God, our true Creator, we will reject him in favor of the substitute. It may even lead us to be unable even to recognize our Maker were we to see him.

What are we to do then? What is our hope?

If we know our hearts, if we know our tendencies, we can be tempted to despair. How easy it is for us to build ourselves a Stepford God until we disconnect ourselves from the True God. We

don't need computer programmers and an expert in animatronics. We can do it all in our own hearts and minds. We can so easily embrace the delusion.

Thankfully, John tells us there is good reason for hope.

Because, of course, there are those who recognize and receive the Light, their Maker. John says so in verse 12: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God"

There *are* those who recognize and receive Jesus Christ, the one who made them. And what enables them to do this when our hearts are so prone to creating Stepford Gods?

Verse 13 tells us they are those "who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." We'll talk about the new birth in a couple chapters, but for now we can summarize from this birth that men and women who come to recognize and receive Christ their Maker do so because God is at work in them.

That should assure us – the fact that God is our ultimate source for our relationship with him should give us a measure of peace.

But it does not call us to passivity. Because God uses means. God works directly in our hearts, yes. But he also works through external means or instruments. And he tells us what those instruments are in this text as well. In fact, that was the first thing we saw. John doesn't present it to us by a command or a principle, but by an example. God uses means, to bring people to faith in him and to strengthen people's faith, so that they may recognize and receive him. And he gives us an example of that in verses six through eight. He writes: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light but came to bear witness about the light."

John tells us here that one of the ways God was at work in the days of Christ's incarnation, one of the ways he was bringing people to himself, was by sending a witness – by sending John the Baptist.

And John the Baptist was a specific witness called for a specific task in a specific moment of redemptive history, but this was not a unique pattern for God. Throughout the Bible and beyond God draws people to himself through witnesses.

And that tells us something of what this text calls us to – how we are to counter this tendency in ourselves and others towards creating substitute Stepford Gods: we are to *seek out* good witnesses and we are to *be* good witnesses.

The importance of witnesses to reality, to keep us and others from going in directions we should not go, is something we see so often in the world. Specifically, we see the effects when that is lacking.

There are countless stories of crime, or of political corruption, or of corporate scandal, where a group begins moving in a morally questionable direction, and it escalates, and it escalates, and it gets completely out of control, and as spectators reading about it all after the fact, we can marvel

that no one acted as a witness to reality – no one stood up and say “Guys! Wait! Stop! What are we doing here??”

Instead, in such situations, people often encourage each other on.

Who we rely on for guidance, who we rely on as a *witness* for what is best, shapes our perception of reality.

That’s even implied in the story we’ve talked about with the Stepford Husbands. Of course, it’s a work of fiction, but on one level we might wonder what would have happened if in the middle of it all someone at the Men’s Association stood up and witnessed to the truth of what they were doing – if someone had called them back to reality and the horror of their project. Then again, on another level, the reason that at least the sociological aspect of the Stepford Husband feels plausible (even if the technological part is not), is because a group of bad witnesses gathered like that is exactly the kind of setting where such horrors could happen: where a man immerses himself in a twisted society and soon becomes twisted himself.

Witnesses to unreality play a key role in evil. And witnesses to reality are essential for good in the world.

What does that mean for us, then? John the Baptist was a witness so that others might believe through him. And so, God continues to use witnesses to draw others to himself today, that they might recognize and receive him.

Which brings us back to those two points: We need to seek out good witnesses of the light, and we need to be true witnesses of the Light.

First, we need to seek out good witnesses of the Light. And that takes a number of forms. Let me briefly identify a few.

The first and foundational witness is, of course, the Word of God – the Scriptures. John was sent as a prophet, a man with a message from God. And God has sent other prophets, whose messages were recorded in this book. And so, the first witness we should seek out is that of God’s Word. We are to study it, we are to meditate on it, we are to let *it* form us – to let *it* correct our tendency to twist our perception of God.

For us the Scripture will be the foundational testimony, the foundational witness of who God revealed in Christ really is – what he is truly like. But as we seek that witness, we need to be intentional about *how* we receive it. Because many groups have had the Scriptures and still turned from the true God to a god of their own design – not least among them being the first-century Jews whom John has been writing about.

So, God sends us his verbal witness in his Word, but he sends us other human witnesses as well, just as he sent John to the people of God in the first century. And so, let me mention at least three other categories of witnesses we would be wise to seek out for our spiritual health: witnesses who are called to teach us, witnesses who are close to us, and witnesses who are different from us. There are others, but let’s consider those three – as each speaks to a trait of John the Baptist.

First, we need witnesses who are called to teach us. That's actually what we are doing right now. So, in some sense, making this point is kind of preaching to the choir. But it's worth acknowledging: Christ calls people to special roles as witnesses among his people, calling them to bear witness to who he is through teaching and preaching. John the Baptist was called to that role in the first century, God called others to that role before him, and God has continued to call teachers and preachers to that role ever since. They are called to teach and preach in such a way that their words are a testimony to God – speaking to who he is and what he would have us do and believe. And God's people are called to put themselves under the instruction and testimony of those who have been called to this task. That is the first kind of witness we are to seek.

Second, we are called to seek witnesses who are close to us. You need someone else who knows Christ, and who is close enough to you, who sees enough into your life, that they can bear witness to you in the *details* of your life and your spiritual walk. They can remind you of who God really is, in the specific ways you need to be reminded. They can call you out in the areas where you are living or thinking contrary to who he is – where you have begun to craft a Stepford God. That means they need to see the good, the bad, and the ugly in your life. John the Baptist was able to see that in the life of God's people as a whole, and in the lives of their leaders. You need someone who can do that in the details of your life as well.

Third, we need to seek witnesses who are different from us. John the Baptist was very different from most first-century Jews, which was part of how he was able to confront them with their misconceptions about God.

Because one added complication is that likeminded people tend to be likeminded in the ways they skew who God is. They tend to seek out the same kind of Stepford Gods. And without being checked, they can reinforce each other in that, rather than witness to each other against it. This is in part how so many in Israel in the first century turned away from the true God.

And to help work against this, God gives us diversity in the people of God in a way that can counter this tendency. That diversity can take a number of forms.

One form is difference in personality. You need fellow believers in your life whom God has gifted differently than you and who have a different temperament than you have, so that they can serve as a witness to what God is like in the areas where your temperament might have some blind spots.

Another form of diversity is denominational. This can be hard for us, but we need relationships with fellow Bible-believing Christians outside of our theological tradition. Because while we will continue to hold to our theological distinctives, believers from other traditions can still help testify to us about aspects of God that we as a group might miss and might be tempted to Stepfordize in order to make ourselves more comfortable.

Another form of this diversity is ethnic or cultural. We need to learn from believers from other cultures and ethnicities. Western culture, even at its highest point, doesn't have the market cornered on expressing the image of God rightly. This is an area I know I need to grow in, but whether it comes to Christians we know or Christians whom we choose to read, where do we need to hear the witness of Christians from other cultures?

A final form I'll mention is historical. C. S. Lewis gets at this in his essay on reading old books, a preface he wrote to Saint Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*. In it, he urged readers to read old books, he said, "Not, of course, [because] there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them." [Lewis, "Preface from the First Edition" 13]

And so, reading Christians from different ages also serves as a witness to us – pointing us to Christ as he is by revealing the places we have tried to make him more to our own liking.

Where do you need to seek out witnesses for Christ in your life, to help you grow in your recognition and reception of him, and to keep you from Stepfordizing God? We are called to seek out such witnesses.

But along with that, we are also called to *be* a witness. We are called to witness ourselves to God *as he is*.

We could of course do a sermon series just on that, but let's just note a few things now that are most relevant to what we've considered this morning.

First, it means that we be people who, when we find a conflict between our gut and the witness of God in his Word, we go with the Word of God. No matter how implausible it *feels* to us, we cling to God's word over our own desires and intuitions. As we do that, as we refuse to Stepfordize God, as we refuse to craft him into our own image but let him craft us into *his* image – in that very act we are bearing witness to others about who God is.

Second, a way we bear witness is that we admit when there is a tension between our gut or our desire and the Word of God. Admitting that is not saying our gut is right – quite the opposite! It is admitting that God has a different view than we naturally would, and that there is work ahead on our part to conform ourselves to him. Maybe he has forbidden something, and we don't understand why. Maybe he has commanded something that seems absurd to us. Maybe he has organized some aspect of our salvation or his people in a way that baffles us. Admitting our struggle with those things is not undermining God – it is instead a step towards fully accepting his Lordship.

Third, a way we can bear witness is by speaking openly about those tensions and letting others speak about them as well. When Christians pretend that there is no aspect of their faith that they struggle to accept God's perspective on, when you act like it all comes so easily, then those who look up to you will not know what to do when *they* struggle with some aspect of God or his Word. They might even be led to think that if your view of God causes you no difficulties, then their view of God should cause them no difficulties either. Admitting to your non-Christian friend that there are teachings of Scripture that you struggle with – teachings that you believe not because they *feel* true to you but because God says in his Word that they are true – that is part of your witness to them ... not an obstacle to it. You are showing them that in fact your God is allowed to have opinions different from yours, and it's *his* opinions that are to shape yours – not the other way around.

The same is true of your Christian friends. Honesty about your struggles may help them admit and face their own. Together you can grow in putting the testimony of God above your own personal desires.

And along with that, honesty in this area with our kids can be a key part of the witness we bear to them. When your adolescent son or daughter tells you about part of their faith that they are struggling with, part of it that doesn't *feel* right to them, are you going to jump down their throats and send them the message that they're better off talking to their peers about their doubts than talking to you? Or will you listen to them, and maybe share the areas of faith that *you* struggle with personally, and then bear witness to the fact that such feelings are not uncommon in the life of faith, but that still our calling is to trust God's witness over our own hearts. And can you accept that acknowledging that tension may not be the end of the struggle for them or for you, but the beginning? Such frank conversations about our faith can be one of the ways that we actually teach our youth that neither they *nor we* get to dictate who God is allowed to be. God is a real person, he is who he is, and we will recognize, receive, and submit ourselves to him because he is God, not because he fits our customized preferred specifications.

So – we seek out witnesses. We act as witnesses. And we rely on God's work. We rely on him through faith and prayer. Our hearts and the hearts of those we love are deceptive. They *want* to Stepfordize God. But God will gather a people to himself, by witnesses and by his work of rebirth. And God will not be thwarted.

Like the Stepford Husbands, the first-century Romans and Israelites decided that the *real* person had to be killed if they were to continue to cling to their customized replacement version.

But unlike the women of Stepford, our God was not so easily cast aside. Christ may have been killed. But he rose again and confronted once more his people and all people with the truth of who he is.

He confronts us as well and calls us to deeper and truer relationship to himself. Let us therefore recognize him, receive him, and truly know him as his children.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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- Straub, Peter. "Introduction to the Perennial Edition" in *The Stepford Wives*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2002.