

Jesus in a fish stick. His mother on a grilled cheese sandwich. Christ with his angels on the cross in the shower. Is this fiction from the mind of a food critic? Is it part of a new mass marketing scheme? Well actually it's neither.

Increasingly, Jesus, Mary, and even the angels in heaven have chosen to forego traditional theophanies, or conventional methods of communication, and have instead revealed themselves in wood splinters, and culinary mistakes.

A man named Fred Whan, from Kingston in Ontario, after burning a fish stick at dinner, found, with the help of his son, the face of Jesus on his fish stick. A year later he took it out of the freezer and put it up for auction on eBay. Diana Duyser a native of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, declared that she had found an image of the Virgin Mary on her decade-old burnt grilled cheese sandwich. She, too, auctioned it off, selling it to GoldenPalace.com for \$28,000.

Elsewhere, halfway around the world, Remona Peterson of Lavender Hill, South Africa, saw the silhouette of Christ on the cross surrounded by his angels in her frosted bathroom window. And finally, a parishioner at St. John of God Church in Somerset, Massachusetts, found the Virgin Mary's face in the wood grain of their church altar.

Ok, so what are we to make of all this? Has God abandoned his usual means of revelation and finally come to us in what we all really understand ... food, wood, and water spots? Or have our imaginations run away with us? Of course, reactions to the divine illustrations I just mentioned have been mixed. Some have even poked fun at the images found especially in "miraculous" food items.

Dan French of *The Examiner*, providing his own thoughts on the images, writes that it seems that "God has a plan for me, and that plan is to sell you his mug, in my beer mug, for four grand!" But, no matter what you think about the weird and "miraculous" images people tend to discover, those latter-day

theophanies do point to a yearning in our culture to find Christ in everyday, ordinary things. Dan explains, “We’re all looking for the same thing, some faith-worthy sign to give us at least a fleeting clue on how to live our best lives and be our best selves in a confused, nearly unnavigable world.”

We dream of touching what we know only by faith, and whether it be in an old sandwich, a burnt fish stick, our own church altar, or even in the frosted glass of a shower stall, these images let us glimpse with our own eyes the unseen Christ.

The problem is that those cheesy divine images also pose a real danger to our faith. How in the world do you lift up a God worthy of praise and thanksgiving, when you’ve just found him on a fish stick? Where are my faith, and my praise for a transcendent God, when that God is not much more than a commodity on eBay? After all, a God we have to save from the garbage disposal, or a God that has emerged from our own culinary mistakes, does nothing worthy of praise. Thanking a God we can sell, or own, or that we can reproduce with everyday items, is a waste of our time.

Please note that I’m not trying to disparage the faith of some of the faithful who genuinely marvel at the effigies they find in unique places or objects. Nor am I saying that their faith isn’t fervent. But perhaps we can grow out or beyond this. Think about it, if you were to paw through a pile of 200 potatoes you are most likely going to find one that looks like Richard Nixon.

The Psalm we sung this evening, urges us to prepare for the coming of the Lord by calling us back to worship, thanksgiving, and praise. And, of course, there’s not even a *hint* that we should look for iconic divine representations in grilled sandwiches, fish sticks, or tortillas. In fact, the first words in Hebrew name it as a psalm of thanks. What follows this introduction are both the reasons, and the words, to thank and praise our God and King. And it tells us we should praise God

for four reasons: because God made us, because God loves us, because we belong to God, and because God is all around us.

First off, *God is our maker*. He is not made by us. The “miraculous images” of Jesus, Mary, and the angels I used to begin my message were all made by human hands. The sandwich was made by a mother. The fish stick was made by a worker. The glass, the dirt, the altar. All made by human beings.

This is not so with God. Our thanksgiving comes because “It is he that made us ...” We did not make him, nor did we fashion him in our image. Rather, we were made in his image. Scripture tells us: “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” We are his creation. He is not ours.

And as his creation, we are to thank and praise God because our understanding is limited. We only know for certain that it was God’s hands that fashioned us together. Everything else is theory and mystery. We praise God because we are his creatures and his creation. He is not ours.

Second of all, *We are loved by God!* We as people love many things that do not love us back. We love our cars, our toys, and our homes. We love food or entertainment. But, none of those things can return our love.

The Bible reminds us that we love a God who loved us first. Scripture tells us: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” God’s steadfast love and faithfulness lasts through all generations. So, it is no accident that the psalmist ends the psalm, “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

We give God thanks and praise for the sole reason that God loves us so much. God went into death itself to claim us as his own. God loved us before we even began to love him, and for this he deserves our thanks and praise.

Next, we remember that *God owns us*. We do not own him. Each of the divine earthly images featuring Jesus, or Mary, or the Angels belong to someone. They were found, claimed, and oftentimes, sold to someone else. In essence, you might say that in the minds of certain individuals God has become the property of human beings.

And yet, when the psalmist writes: “we are his ...,” it is a statement of ownership. We belong to God in Christ, he does not belong to us. We do not and cannot own him, no matter what. Since we are his, it is fitting that we thank and praise him. As creations owned by a creator, we cry out in praise and thanksgiving for all he gives and does for us.

And last, but not least, *God is all around us!* We give God thanks and praise because the face of Christ is found, not on the burn marks of a baked piece of fish, but in the marks of life in the faces around us. “We are his people” and as his people, we discover Christ’s presence in the faces of the people with whom we live and work, and those with whom we don’t live and work — the needy, the marginalized, the less fortunate, those in prison, those on welfare, those who live in rich houses or cardboard shacks, those who are different from us, those who live in freedom, and those who live in the shadow of tyranny.

I think it goes without saying, but we need not look for Christ who says “Whatever you did for the least of my brethren, you did for me” in a piece of baked fish! We need not worry ourselves about the steam marks on our shower doors when he has promised to be in the faces of those around us. It should not be easier to see Christ in frosted glass than it is to see him in the faces of our neighbors.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving and move into the season of Advent, if we long to see Christ, we need only to look around us. Christ is with us in the faces of our neighbors. In the people who do what Christ does for us as they care, provide,

love, and keep us safe. And in the people we are called to be Christ to, doing the same for them.

God deserves our thanks and praise. God created us! God has claimed us! God paid the ultimate price for us! And God surrounds us with people who reflect his face and presence! So, don't be looking for God in the drumstick of a turkey, or in a pile of mash potatoes on your dinner plates tomorrow. Instead, look for God in the faces of those gathered around your table, those wandering the streets of your neighborhoods, or those conversing at the water cooler in the office. And don't forget to give thanks! Amen.