

THE Word Icon
Sermon, November 25, 2018
Christ the King Sunday
Texts: Hebrews 1:1-3; Colossians 1:9-20

Thursday was Thanksgiving; it was also the 55th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I mentioned this illustration five years ago near the fiftieth anniversary of that event; like most baby boomers, I remember exactly where I was when I heard about it: I was sitting in my fourth grade class when Mrs. Floor (*the fifth grade teacher*) came in to tell Mrs. Ross (*my fourth grade teacher*) that the president had been assassinated, and none of us really knew what she was talking about because none of us knew what the word “assassinated” meant, but we knew it must be something bad because Mrs. Floor was so upset! Not long after November 22, 1963 and the subsequent funeral events that riveted a nation, the iconic images of Camelot on Pennsylvania Avenue began to appear all over the media, particularly *Life* magazine, images that inspired and moved our nation at a deep gut level. I’m sure you’re familiar with the term “iconic image.” An iconic image is a picture or photo or a portrait that is more than just a picture; it is a symbol that inspires and moves you at a deep gut level.¹

Some of you remember that iconic, idyllic portrayal of the Kennedy White House inspired by the musical of the same name so wildly popular in the early sixties. Camelot was the story of long-ago England, during the time of the legendary Knights of the Round Table, a nearly-perfect time when hope, love, joy and peace abounded, and it never rained before eight o’clock in the evening. As King Arthur sang to Sir Tom of Warwick *“Each evening from December to December, Before you drift to sleep upon your cot, Think back upon all the tales you remember -- of Camelot. Ask every person if he’s heard the story, And tell it strong and clear if he has not – That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory ... called Camelot.”* Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot For a brief and shining moment Was known as ... Camelot.”² A week or so after the assassination the magazines and newspapers were filled with the crafted iconic images of Camelot on Pennsylvania Avenue ... that “fleeting wisp of glory” cut short by an assassin’s bullet, that “brief and shining moment” in our nation with this youthful, energetic, optimistic leader with his gorgeous and stylish wife, and their two adorable children, John-John and Caroline.

As one New York Times columnist wrote, *“For those who idolized him, he was the charismatic leader and family man who would have extricated America from the horror of Vietnam. The liberal-minded reformer who would have dismantled segregation and repaired the country’s racial breach. To his detractors, however, Kennedy was a playboy president, who enlarged America’s involvement in Vietnam, regarded civil rights cynically as a political problem to manage rather than a moral issue to champion; in short, for them the prince of the Camelot presidency was at best an average President, and a subpar husband.”* Leaving aside for now which interpretation I think more accurate, I’ll just point out the **iconic image** of the Kennedy Camelot had great appeal. Why? I believe it’s because there lies deep in every human heart a longing to be in a society characterized by innocence, idealism, beauty, and most of all, hope. And this yearning is right and good and even God given. But as New York Times columnist Russ Douthat warned, there is danger when we confuse charisma with competence, rhetoric with results, and celebrity with genuine achievement in our political leadership ... but that’s another sermon.³

Paul would tell us Jesus is THE iconic image of God; an iconic image that is neither hyped nor crafted nor in any way inaccurate. Jesus fully captures the living essence of God; in Him we find the epitome of the Deity, and the epitome of innocence, idealism, beauty, goodness and hope. As we read earlier: *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him.”* “He is the image of the invisible God.” One synonym for “image” is “picture.” Paul tells us Jesus is a picture of God, and not just a still shot, but an animated, living, breathing picture, making visible the God who is otherwise invisible. This is a basic point of Christian theology; in short, we believe Jesus is God in flesh and blood come so that we who are flesh and blood might know more about Who God is, what God is like, and what it is God wants of us. As we affirm in the Nicene Creed, Jesus is *“... God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made ...”*

¹ For an interesting account of how the Camelot image was crafted after the assassination, and not before, see <http://www.thenation.com/blog/177333/kennedy-week-myth-camelot-and-dangers-sycophantic-consensus-journalism#>

² Some may also remember the Dec. 3, 2017 sermon based on the Camelot theme; see <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/from-december-to-december-2017.pdf>

³ See http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/opinion/sunday/Douthat-The-Enduring-Cult-of-Kennedy.html?_r=0

One synonym for "image" is "picture", another synonym is "icon." An *icon* is defined by the dictionary as a representation; particularly a religious representation such as a statue or painting of a religious figure. Well, in this sense Jesus is the perfect, true and living Icon/Picture, the truly representative and complete and full *iconic image* of the invisible God. As our reading from Hebrews expresses it, "*The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful Word.*"

"*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*" Just as a brief aside, the word "firstborn" here has more to do with *rank* more than with *sequential order*. The "first born" is the chief inheritor; as we just read in from Hebrews 1:2, Jesus is Whom God "... appointed heir of all things, and through Whom He made the universe." Jesus was not "created" (BTW, that's what the Jehovah's Witnesses believe). Jesus is eternally begotten, not made, but first in RANK over all. This gets a bit into the theological weeds, but suffice it to say for now the *eternally begotten* Son of God (as we express it in the Nicene Creed) is sovereign both within and over creation, for He was not only present at creation, but He was the One through whom God created all things. And the One who entered the world in order to redeem it is the One through whom God created the world in the first place. "*He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.*"



For many of you, particularly those under the age of, oh, fifty or so, the first thing that might have popped into your mind when you saw the sermon title is a symbol on your computer screen that allows you to enter and utilize the Word program. Those definitions of "Icon" and "Word" do not even appear in the Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary I have in my office, a dictionary I received as a college graduation gift; those computer-ese definitions of Icon and Word didn't exist yet at its publishing. So many word (small w) definitions have changed with the prevalent invasion of computers in our offices and homes and now even in our pockets via smart phone technology.⁴ One of the hardest things for older people about getting computer-savvy is just learning the lingo. I've used this before, but it's worth repeating: Before the computer, memory was something that you lost with age. Before the computer, an application was for employment, and an Apple product was pie (or cider). Before the computer, a program was something you watched on TV. Before the computer, a cursor was someone with a dirty mouth. Before the computer, a keyboard was a piano and the web was the spider's home. Before the computer, a virus was the flu. Before the computer, a CD was a bank account (and a CD-ROM was a bank account in Italy). Before the computer, a hard drive was a long trip on the road with your children; a hard drive crashing is what would happen if you got too distracted by the behavior of those kids. Before the computer, a mouse was something the cat brought in, and a mouse pad was where the mouse lived before the cat nabbed him. And before the computer, an icon was a religious image. Today you can open the *applications* of most *programs* or *access the web* by pointing the *cursor* to the *icon* and clicking the *mouse* ... and my 85 year old mother probably would not understand any of that preceding sentence. Definitions have changed. When you use your *mouse* to click an *icon* with the *cursor*, you enter the *program* through the *icon*. The program associated with the icon opens up, and you find yourself transported into this wondrous world with almost limitless wonders of things you can do, now that you're "in."

Well, even with this modern definition of icon, Jesus is the still the Icon of the Kingdom of God! The imagery still works over the centuries and the generations! He is the ultimate WORD, THE Icon, the Word made flesh (as we'll be talking about often during the Advent season coming up), THE Word Icon who will get you into the full "program" of God's kingdom! He is the One, the only One, through whom you and I enter into God's "program;" in Him is found the fullness of God's presence, and through Him you enter the limitless wonders of God's boundless reality. This is what the church confesses about Jesus today! Christ the King is *the* Icon, the One through whom you and I can be drawn into the God "program," into the vast wonders of His Kingdom. He is the Word; the "iconic image" of God, the Divine "App." When you come to Jesus Christ in prayer and faith and repentance, you are "clicking on" the Icon that opens up the eternal realities and wonders of the God "program." Jesus doesn't just show us the way; He IS the Way. He is the God Who has come to us that through this Iconic Image we may enter fully into the glorious "program" of the Kingdom of God and work its wonders forever and ever!

The second commandment notwithstanding, this is one "image" or "icon" we are encouraged and even commanded to worship!

⁴ If you were born in the 1990s and later, you grew up with cell phones and do not remember a time before the internet. According to a 2015 marketing survey, two out of three US teens own an iPhone, making them the first generation for whom Internet access has been constantly available, right there in their pockets ... and we're still figuring out the negative and positive repercussions of that. I remember reading the average teen checks his/her phone more than eighty-five times a day; when I was a teen, I was lucky to have the phone ring once a day!