

The Unique Christ: Touching the Face of God
By Jason Huff
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Some of you read the magazine *Imprimis*, a publication of Hillsdale College here in Michigan. If so, you might have heard part of this story recently, but it was new to me, and it sparked in me a lot of thoughts about Christmas. I'll tell you the story, and then I'll tell you the parallels.

Many of us have heard of Helen Keller. She became famous for being able to communicate despite being struck both blind and deaf at nineteen months of age. Through the work of Anne Sullivan, she eventually learned how to not only understand the world around her but to read, write, and speak publicly, becoming quite famous. She lived to the age of 87 and died in 1968, far later than I ever thought!

What I also didn't know is that she was a contemporary of Mark Twain, perhaps the quintessential American author and humorist. Taken with her story, he made connections that made it possible for her to attend college and to become the first person who was both deaf and blind to earn a Bachelors' Degree. They were fast friends, even though at their first meeting she was 14 and he was 59.

In her autobiography, she tells of their last meeting in 1909, not long before he died. He hosted her and Anne Sullivan in his home, and one evening, he offered to read one of his stories to Helen. He wasn't sure how it would work exactly – she told him that Anne would spell his words into her hand. He commented, "I had thought you would read my lips." And so that's what she did. He dressed in the robe given to him by Oxford University when they gave him their degree of Doctor of Letters. He sat in his armchair, his book in one hand and his pipe in the other. Helen sat with her elbow on the arm of the chair so that her fingers could rest on his lips.

This worked for a while until Twain, who was a good storyteller, got carried away in telling his story. His motions, his articulation, it started to making things confused. So Anne took Helen's hand and spelled Twain's words into her hand. Helen kept her hand on Twain's face, now able not only to get the words but Twain's expressions, his hand motions, the deep meaning and feeling in his storytelling. As she would say later after his death, "In my fingertips was graven the image of his dear face...and in my memory his drawling, marvelous voice will always vibrate."

Talking about Twain, Helen Keller said, "He kept me always in mind while he talked, and he treated me like a competent human being. That is why I loved him. There was about him the air of one who had suffered greatly...sometimes I have complained in my heart because many pleasures of human experience have been withheld from me, but when I recollect the treasure of friendship that has been bestowed upon me I withdraw all charges against life. If much has been denied me, much, very much has been given me. So long as the memory of certain beloved friends lives in my heart I shall say that life is good."

When I read that story, I was almost moved to tears, but not because of any great love for Helen Keller or Mark Twain (though I took a class on Mark Twain in college). It wasn't because these two were standout Americans, which is kind of why the story was featured. It wasn't even necessarily because of this poignant moment between two friends, the last they'd ever have.

The reason I got a little misty was because in this story, I saw our story. I saw the story of humanity and God echoed in such real ways that reflect the truth of the Christmas story and why we're all here gathered around our computers tonight. I saw the truth and it hit me like a ton of bricks.

We are born into this world spiritually blind and deaf. We cannot hear the voice of our Creator and we are blind to His hand showing through all He has done that we can see. We are oblivious to God's design. We do not have the means to understand what He has done and what He is doing. And unlike a Helen Keller who desperately wanted out of her silent prison, we are often blissfully ignorant of our lackings. In fact, Scripture says we are spiritually dead. Our spiritual senses aren't working because sin has killed them off.

But God is not content with the prize of His creation being forsaken forever, separated from Him by our misdeeds. He wants to claim us, bring us alive in our spirits, bring us into His Kingdom, make us His sons and daughters, give us all the rights and privileges of kings and queens of His perfect and holy heaven. The Old Testament Scriptures tell of God's promises and His promised people.

Yet even the best of them flail in the dark. Even the best of them, alivened spiritually through the Holy Spirit, yes, but still filled with doubt and despair, unable to hear God's Word, unable to see His light, following their own paths and stumbling headlong into sin. God gave them a holy law that points out His glory, and yet the law only became a stumbling block upon their sightless path. As the Old Testament era closes, the light of Israel grows even more dim. The prophets go silent. Multiple pagan empires close in around them. The reality of spiritual hopelessness begins to set in.

So the Father sends us the Son...and through the power of the Holy Spirit, that long-dead spirit starts to feel a pulse. When Jesus comes, we have God in the flesh, whom we can see and hear for ourselves. Though the spiritual deafness and blindness lingers, we can touch the face of God. We can read His lips and begin to make out His voice. When we can't take it all in, His Word is there, the Spirit is there, signing the letter of God's Word into our hearts and minds and souls. We don't just hear God's words or receive His instructions, we experience Him through the incarnation. Jesus is God with us.

That picture of intimacy, not fully seeing, not fully hearing, not fully comprehending, yet knowing God's truth, revealed to us in Jesus, revealed to us in His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus would know what it was to suffer greatly. And yet He did it willingly so that He would not just cure the blind and the deaf and the lame from their physical ailments, but from the spiritual blindness and deafness and lameness we are all in from birth. The infant child we celebrate tonight would live for us, die for us, and rise again for us. In Him, we could finally see the face of God. We could hear His voice. And we did not need to be afraid.

Helen Keller wrote of how her friendship with those like Mark Twain banished any thought of the difficulties she experienced from her state. Knowing such a thoughtful, intelligent, caring individual made those very real disabilities seem to fade away. Friends, tonight, we are invited into a similar friendship with Jesus – one far richer, one far deeper, because He is the author of love, the author of hope, the author of compassion and mercy.

When we could not and would not seek Him, He sought us. He tells our spirits to come to life. He nurses us back to spiritual health. He places our hand on His face and mouths the words we need to understand. He calls us to draw near to Him and to know Him personally, as the dearest of friends.

Will you trust in Him enough to let Him take your hand? Will you trust in Him enough to learn from Him, to grow in Him, to value His friendship? May it be so for all of us. Because I believe when we truly know Jesus, when we start to fathom the depths of His love for us, when we recognize all He has done simply to be near to us, the very real difficulties of this life will start to fade as we realize that a relationship with God is what we were made for.

Welcome His friendship this evening, follow after Him as one ready to learn His ways, and He will give you eternal life, He will become your friend, and you will find that your spirit truly has touched the face of God.