

## What do we mean when we say “Jesus?”

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Mark 8:27-30

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

<sup>27</sup> Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” <sup>28</sup> And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup> He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup> And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

A few Sundays ago, we asked “*what do we mean when we say ‘God’?*” Today, I want to ask today “*what do we mean when we say Jesus?*”

There are so many *different ideas about who Jesus was--who he is.*

- Movies: Jesus Christ Superstar (*image*); Jim Cavaziel, passion of the Christ (*image*), Jonathan Roumie, The Chosen (*image*)
- Novels: some of you know Jesus as the lion in CS Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia (*image*); a very different, and very tortured Jesus appears in Kazantzakis’ Last Temptation of Christ (*image*)
- Not all of the images are serious: Buddy Christ, 1999 movie Dogma (*image*) is a popular internet meme
- South Park (*image*); brilliant satire
- Sexy Jesus AI, recent Atlantic article (*image*)

There is, of course, the dominant cultural image of Jesus: Warner Sallman, 1940

- (*white Jesus image*): As with God, the temptation is to make Jesus in our own image.

The prevalence of that Jesus image makes THIS Jesus image so startling ... created by a forensic anthropologist... (*image of middle eastern Jesus*)

How are there so many differing images of Jesus? It’s almost like we don’t know Jesus. Like he’s an enigma, a cypher for our dreams and projections...

One reason why there are so many different versions of Jesus is that our source material isn’t all that clear...

(*black Jesus image*)

No physical description of Jesus in the Bible. We don’t know if he was 5’2 or 6’2, or if he was stocky or thin; if had a big round nose or a thin angular one; we don’t know his hair color or eye color; we don’t know if he was conventionally attractive or 3.5/10.

(*Korean Jesus image*)

Not only do we not know what Jesus looked like, it's hard to know with any certainty exactly what Jesus said and did.

- While the 4 gospels follow the same basic story about Jesus' life, they don't agree on much. The birth stories are unreliable. None has information about Jesus as a teenager up to age 30. The gospels disagree about where Jesus went, when he went there, what he said, and what he did. The gospels are actually not even all that concerned with presenting the "facts" of Jesus' life.
- It can leave you wondering whether we know anything about Jesus at all.

#### *(Greek Jesus)*

For over 200 years, some of the greatest minds in the world have tried to piece together "the historical Jesus." Albert Schweitzer's 1906 book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* is still one of the great books ever written about Jesus. The 20<sup>th</sup> century project called "the Jesus Seminar" was an amazing attempt to figure out what we know, for sure, about Jesus. The results are fascinating--you can read them online, but if you don't read them yourself, I'll summarize by saying "a few parables and eating with sinners." The Jesus Seminar did introduce the world to John Dominic Crossan, who has become the leading contemporary authority on the historical Jesus. He's got a ton of books--my favorite is "The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant." Crossan shows us Jesus as a disciple of John the Baptist, who, after John was arrested, gathered his own disciples and became a wandering teacher of Jewish wisdom. Jesus becomes known for three things, free healing, communal meals, and great stories. The healings, and the meals, Crossan says, are protests: anti-hierarchical tactics designed to subvert the social order imposed by the Roman Empire and the religious leaders. The stories are the parables--provocative, open-ended thought experiments designed to draw you in to the real point of Jesus' ministry: life, not in the Empire of Rome, but in the Empire of God. As Jesus became popular, the authorities resented him; so they sent him up on criminal charges and executed him.

#### *(breadline Jesus)*

Crossan, like most everyone in the historical Jesus tradition, is skeptical of miracles and of a bodily resurrection. But he insists that what we do know about Jesus the man is enough to inspire us to keep following him. Jesus' life was about leveling oppressive social hierarchies, freeing us to live in truly just relationships. Jesus modeled non-violent resistance to a violent, greedy empire. He showed us the better way: generosity, radical welcome, taking care of one another, responding to offenses with peace and mercy.

#### *(Mexican Jesus)*

You can probably tell that I love the historical Jesus tradition. But I also think it's not enough. I'm an unashamed curiosity-seeking of this thing called "resurrection." As important as Jesus, the man, is, there is no testimony about Jesus the man that doesn't also say Jesus is risen. People didn't write down stuff about a super nice guy named Jesus. The people who wrote stuff about Jesus said he was a super good guy who was raised from death into life. Something happened after Jesus died that blew peoples' minds--and changed the course of their lives.

What that something was... what happened on Easter Sunday... will always be a mystery. We just don't know. The last verse of the beautiful, mournful Spiritual "were you there when they crucified my Lord" sings: "were you there when God raised him from the tomb?" That's the question of our faith. But it's a question that points us into the mystery. No one else was there. Whatever happened is held in darkness before the Easter dawn.

Yet every early Christian community affirmed that something happened on Easter. Every early Christian community coalesced around a Jesus whom death could not hold. Every early Christian community shared the testimony of an experience of Jesus who had defeated death--a Jesus who passed on his death-defeating, mercy-giving, enemy-loving power to his disciples.

Those earliest Christians had an experience of the Risen Christ that felt to them like a new kind of freedom. It was the freedom to live differently than the world around them. The freedom to gather as truly diverse communities. The freedom to shower love on each other. This freedom gave them a fearfully righteous courage to say that this was the way God intended all people to live.

Those early Christians kept Jesus at the center of their new community. They found new names for Jesus: "Messiah," a Jewish name for the one God sends to rule on earth; the Greek word for messiah is "Christos." They called Jesus "Lord" and "Son of God," titles they took from the Emperor and gave to the one who had demonstrated that all true power is found in love. They kept up Jesus' tradition of eating meals with sinners, and in the meal they found their communion with Jesus continued.

*(jesus with bystanders)*

There is no single understanding of who Jesus was or what Jesus means. We keep trying, we keep looking, we keep squinting our eyes in the darkness of Easter morning, because there is no Christianity without Jesus who is Risen. We do our best pattern ourselves after his life, obey his teaching, tremble at his death, and remain always open to the beautiful mystery that God raised Jesus from the dead. We look at Jesus and we say, "this person is fully human, and fully God."

At some point in your life, your experience with Jesus will move from intellectual experience to existential encounter.

A year before his death, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a Nazi prison, wrote in a letter to his friend Eberhard Bethge: "What keeps gnawing at me, is the question... who is Christ for us *today*?" Today.

Bonhoeffer wasn't doing abstract theology. Bonhoeffer had watched the rise of the Third Reich, saw the way the church yielded to Hitler's plan for a racist empire. The institution

entrusted to carry the message of Jesus had shattered. Bonhoeffer knew that it was in the shattering of the edifice of Christianity, that he might have a hope of finding Jesus.

What, in the face of the Nazis, does it look like to follow the Prince of Peace? What does a courageous, faithful love look like, when the way isn't clear or easy? What does discipleship look like when we might have to sacrifice our own values for the sake of the greater good? What happens when we know we might have to lose the part of ourselves we love the most... or even lose our life... to save it? That is Christian theology; that is when you are drawn close to the humanity and the divinity of Jesus.

We will always be searching for more truth about who Jesus was. But what matters is who Jesus *is*. What happens when you encounter him? When Jesus emerges from the shadows of time and becomes a present reality, and calls you into life?

Your present encounter with Jesus remains as consequential now as it has ever been--for you and for our world. Writer James Carroll recently said, "We don't know what God is; but we don't yet know what a human is, either." There remains the promise that in Jesus, we might find the answer to both.