

“Jesus Who?”

By design, church is just a little bit weird. For example, we have our own calendar. Whereas the rest of the world goes by January, February and March, and has intelligible seasons like summer, fall, winter and spring, in the church we basically ignore months and have oddly named seasons of bewilderingly different lengths.

Advent is between three and four weeks long and gets us ready for Christmas. Advent is also the beginning of the church year; so most years for us begin in late November... but some years it's December. What sense does that make?

And Christmas is a season, not just a day. It begins on Christmas Eve and culminates twelve days later when everybody's really sick of Christmas because the halls have been decked since Halloween. It goes on like that. Epiphany comes next, and is as long as it needs to be to get to the beginning of Lent. Lent is always forty days (not counting Sundays) leading up to Easter, which in the western world we celebrate on the (are you ready?) first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

I rest my case: by design, church is weird. Why?

The different seasons help us emphasize different realities at different times. God is always coming to us as the foundation of hope, peace, joy and love. But in Advent we say so. God is always revealed to us in Jesus Christ, the light of the world; but Epiphany is the season we emphasize that reality. Love that is truly love always entails suffering. Lent is the season we remember that. And life is triumphant and love never faileth... always. But a holy day and a season called Easter celebrate resurrection. God is all of these things, and more, all at once; but the weirdness of the church year helps us focus on one thing at a time.

So today we are poised between two seasons, Epiphany and Lent. And we are more or less compelled by the lectionary to visit one of the most important questions we can examine together: Who is Jesus?

The question sounds so basic that it seems almost silly to raise it. But the truth is that we answer it in many different ways. Because the United Church of Christ is not at its heart a creedal church; because we do not have to subscribe

to particular theological formulations in order to be a part of this family of faith, the fact is that we believe a lot of different things about Jesus.

To some of us Jesus' primary importance is as a teacher or a moral philosopher. We admire his teachings and see him in some circumstances as a model for human behavior. To others Jesus is primarily a social reformer who came to challenge systems of injustice and to advocate on behalf of the poor. Still others view Jesus' primary importance as summoning us to salvation, offering himself as an atoning sacrifice to free us from the just condemnation of a righteous God.

For most of us, Jesus is some combination of all of the above. The Bible supports all of these views and more. And so the question of who Jesus is could well occupy us for a lifetime. We get four very different portraits of Jesus through the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But when all is said and done we still have to come to our own conclusions about him. Who is Jesus?

Our Gospel lesson for today offers a particularly challenging—and appropriate—place to begin. It is Mark's version of the story of the transfiguration, when Jesus undergoes a mysterious and startling change in the presence of some of his disciples. This story of Jesus' glory marks the culmination of our season of Epiphany, the season of light. We start out with the delicate, flickering glow of candles at Christmas; we end up with the dazzlingly radiant face of Jesus, shining like the sun.

We find the story of Jesus' transfiguration in all three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. And in every instance it comes at a similar point in the story. Peter has shared with Jesus' inner circle his conviction that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus has responded that this means that he will go to Jerusalem where he will suffer, be put to death, and rise again. Shortly after these conversations, Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter, James and John to pray. There he is transfigured: his face changes appearance and his clothing glows with a divine radiance beyond the reach of bleach, borax and brighteners.

This doesn't sound so impressive to modern folks, I suppose. We're pretty jaded through exposure to cinematic special effects. But the story is not intended merely to be astonishing in itself; it is filled with elements that are rich in symbolic meaning.

To begin with, light—glory—is about all human beings ever get to see of God. We speak of the glory of God, God's radiance, because we can't ever glimpse the reality of God. It's like seeing the sun's corona but never being

able to look at the sun itself. Light is also the first act of creation, the first emanation from the being of God.

In the ancient world, you had two sources of illumination: heavenly bodies—sun, moon and stars—and fire. So if you're looking at something that is glowing but not on fire, you're looking at God. For Jesus to be a source of light on his own makes a powerful statement.

Two figures appear alongside the radiant Christ: Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah are the preeminent spiritual figures in the Hebrew Bible, Moses representing the law and Elijah the prophets. For Jesus to be in this company makes another statement about his spiritual authority.

Peter has his mind pretty much blown by this experience, so he suggests that they put together some shelters as was done each year at the feast of booths, a fall harvest festival. This idea is emblematic of the relentless tendency we have to domesticate raw religious experience, to reduce it to the rules and rituals of religion. But before this suggestion even receives a response a cloud comes and overshadows the whole group.

Clouds are a common biblical image for the presence of God. During the exodus from Egypt, the people are led by God as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to meet with God and to receive the Ten Commandments, the top of the mountain is enveloped in clouds, symbolic of the divine presence. In today's lesson the cloud comes with a voice, which says, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Jesus alone heard those words earlier, when he was baptized.(1:11) Now the disciples hear them, as well. To all of this is added, as though it were necessary, a final message regarding the authority of Jesus: "...listen to him!"

Light and glory, Moses and Elijah, the cloud and the voice: the vision is an overwhelming testimony to the person and mission of Jesus... and it comes not a moment too soon. In just about a chapter, Jesus will predict his death yet again; then he will begin a journey that ends in Jerusalem, setting in motion the events of Holy Week. The divine voice of affirmation will be silent for a long time, as the glow fades, Moses and Elijah disappear, and Jesus is once again left with followers who are not fully sure what it is that they have just experienced.

As we seek to interpret this passage, it helps to keep in mind that it is a story about Jesus. The gospel story is told from the perspective of how it ends, with the meaning of everything Jesus ever said and did coming clear only because we know that the final word is resurrection, life. The fleeting glimpse of glory we get today helps us to remember the glory that awaits, even though

there will be times when it all seems headed to a dead end. No matter what lies ahead, remember the mountaintop: that's a lot easier to say than it is to do.

The central affirmation is that Jesus' suffering is part of a greater purpose. Contrary to what we hear from most television preachers, that purpose goes beyond the simple satisfaction of a penalty, as though a bloodthirsty God has to demand that a price be paid for sin, and a sinless Jesus steps forward to take on himself the sins of the world; as though somebody has to pay the fine and God doesn't care who it is. That way of characterizing Jesus' death made sense in a world where getting right with God required taking an animal to the Jerusalem temple and offering a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. It is in this sense that we talk about Jesus being the Lamb of God, and in the context of ancient religious practice such language was very meaningful.

But it doesn't make a lot of sense to us to say that Jesus had to die in order that we might be forgiven, as though the rules about forgiveness have to involve somebody's blood. To be sure, from other quarters we're going to be hearing the gospel message expressed that way a lot in the next six weeks. But is there another way to talk about what it all means?

It is meaningful to me to say that Jesus died as a consequence of sin; that a life that is the embodiment of God's love inevitably runs headlong into the reality of sin, understood as a spiritual power that causes us to think and behave as though the world is supposed to revolve around us rather than around God. Every figure in the gospel story shows how the grip of sin distorts human relationships, perverts the heart, and issues in acts of cruelty.

- The Romans' lust for empire admitted no value but their own power, and made them willing to crucify all those who claimed that somebody else—even God—was in charge. The Roman soldiers were only too delighted to torture a self-proclaimed "King of the Jews".
- The religious leaders, too, were striving to preserve their own power: to maintain control and to resist any new expression of truth that might be on the horizon.
- The crowds wanted a quick fix, a messiah who would come along and deliver them from the Romans, but not from themselves: save me, God, fix my life and make it all easy... but don't change me.
- Even Jesus' closest followers, when it came down to it, were more intent on saving their own hides than in witnessing to a new truth

from God, especially a truth that they could never quite manage to grasp.

Denials, betrayals, brutality, racism, torture, indifference... it's all there, a whole panorama of the fruits of human sinfulness, and Jesus walks right into it and meets it with love. He forgives his enemies, which is hard enough; and forgives his friends, which is harder still. Right into the valley of death he goes to show us that the real glory has nothing to do with thrones or empires or any kind of power we know about; the real glory has to do with the power of love to overcome treachery and sin.

Jesus suffered and died not because all the people in power happened to be having a bad day, but because human beings in the grip of sin are capable of nothing better. The wages of sin is death; and Jesus' death was horrific.

But the central message of the Gospel is that God raised Jesus from the dead, and in so doing vindicated the message of love that Jesus taught and lived. We can be reconciled with God because Jesus brought a love and forgiveness that sin and even death cannot stop. In the end love—not sin—is the greatest power in the universe; and love is never more powerful than when it appears to be completely helpless... in a manger, or on the cross.

That's what Jesus means. That's what we need to keep in mind, through the darkness of the season of Lent and through every dark night of the soul. We can say it in two words: love wins! We can say it in one word: YES! In Jesus Christ, God says yes to life. With our lips and with our lives, may we say YES to Jesus Christ.

Amen

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