

## JESUS WHO?

Do you know Jesus? I know, it sounds like a question for a different kind of preacher and a different kind of church, but it's an honest question. Do you know Jesus? Do you know about him, and what he did, the fullness of who he was and still can be to us? And if you do, would you mind telling me? Because I've been working on that one a long time.

When I was young (yes, the 26-year old just said "when I was young"), Jesus was a person – a special person with a special relationship to God. He was someone who was kind, who was gentle, who was peaceful. He laughed and cried. He was like us, and we were to be like him.

As the years passed, Jesus became, to many around me, a Savior, a holy sacrifice. I wasn't a part of that group, so the idea of being blown away by the One who would lay down his life for our sins, or feeling the threat of Hell if I wasn't born again, seemed strange to me. But when I wasn't rolling my eyes, I was wondering: Is all that true? How does that work? Who is Jesus, then?

Then I went to college, and the world got a lot bigger than Antioch, IL. The Bible had to stand up to a lot more than my limited imagination and experience, but history, economics, sociology, psychology and literary criticism. The call of Jesus became more than personal inspiration, but also a call to social transformation. And I realized that the light-skinned, brown-haired, blue-eyed Jesus in the paintings on my church's walls were not all that Jesus was. Jesus had to be more than my internal convictions if he was to withstand the ridicule, reason and reverence of my peers.

It was during that year that I felt a call to ordained ministry, and I headed off to seminary. But I couldn't shake the feeling that, when it came to Jesus, I just wasn't getting what everyone else was getting.

And then *The Da Vinci Code* came out and everything changed! (No, not really).

But I did go to seminary, and I learned my share. But no matter what, when it comes to Jesus, I always seem to come out just a few steps behind.

Who is Jesus? It's not just my question, of course – it's the central question of today's Scripture reading. Many would say that Matthew's entire gospel narrative is crafted to make one point: Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>i</sup>

Not that I think you need the whole gospel (at least not this morning). Our reading today is full of Old Testament allusions, and to those for whom all these references would have been familiar, they combine to make this point without all that much subtlety. For us, though, it takes a little bit of unpacking.

"Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves." Traditionally, this mountain has been identified as Mount

Tabor, but I don't think it matters much. In biblical language, when you're heading up the "high mountain," you're heading to a symbolically holier place – a fuzzy border between earth and heaven.<sup>ii</sup> Moses went up a high mountain to receive the Ten Commandments, for instance.<sup>iii</sup>

“And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” Again, an allusion to Moses, whose face shone as he descended from Mount Sinai, tablets in hand, after his encounter with God. And in case you're not yet convinced, Moses and Elijah appear, speaking with Jesus. Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, symbolic of the Prophets, who was to come again before the coming of the Messiah.

Peter responds as, I think, any of us would to the sight of two long-dead prophets: by offering to put up some tents. A bit strange, perhaps, but the impulse rings true: “Can't we stay? Can't we just hold onto this for a little while?”

But he is cut off by a voice from a cloud that overshadowed them.<sup>iv</sup> “This is my Son, the Beloved;” says the voice, “with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” If these words sound familiar, it's because they are the exact words from Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism,<sup>v</sup> with the addition of the emphatic affirmation: “listen to him!” Thus it serves both as a confirmation of what we learned about Jesus during his baptism (that he is the Son of God), and as a foreshadowing that much of the important stuff is still to come.

And the voice fades away, and the terrified disciples look up from the ground, and it has all disappeared: the cloud, the voice, the prophets, the law, the holy light. And, with uncompromising clarity, Matthew tells us that the disciples saw only “Jesus, himself, alone.” And they headed down the mountain together.

There's something very important about Jesus in this story, I believe, and not just that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus is a journey. The disciples walk with Jesus. We heard the story of their call last week, as they left the boats and families to follow Jesus. They have walked with him, teaching and healing, learning and being healed. They follow him up the mountain, witness his transfiguration, and follow him down the mountain. Back to the world, and back to a journey that will lead them to Jerusalem, to an arrest and a crucifixion, and ultimately to a resurrection.

Jesus is a journey. You've heard a bit of my journey already, and I've come to know that each step in this journey has offered some truth. Yes, Jesus is a friend. Yes, Jesus is a Savior. Jesus is a revolutionary, a healer, the Son of God. Jesus is all of that and more. But to know that, to know Jesus, we must walk alongside him. Jesus is much more than a concept to be captured, but a relationship to be experienced.

Not just one relationship, either, but an odd mix of relationships. Savior, friend, Lord, teacher, companion, God. This is the paradox manifested by the transfiguration: the disciples see at once the Jesus they have always known, and more than they will ever

know. And I, for one, find great hope in the disciples continuing confusion: even after all that, the disciples still didn't know Jesus completely.

Jesus is unknowable because he is divine, and he will always be holy mystery to us. But Jesus is also unknowable because he is human, and cannot be captured by our understanding any more than any of us can be captured by another. The fullness of Jesus can't be communicated anymore than we can fully express ourselves.

But we are given glimpses.<sup>vi</sup> We're given moments of revelation, when our eyes are opened to see more of Jesus. And often our reaction is like Peter's, whenever these moments of grace happen. Whether it's the quiet insight of a still moment or the grand revelation of a mountaintop experience, our response is the same: "Can't we stay? Can't we hold onto all this for a little while?"

We can't, of course. The journey continues. Jesus leads us back down the mountain, because there is more to be learned, more to be done. More to be revealed in actions and relationships.

"What a friend we have in Jesus?" "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" "Savior, like a Shepherd lead us?" Wherever we are in our journey with Jesus, we can be sure that we're not alone.

As for coming out a few steps behind Jesus? Well, I've come to think that's pretty inevitable. But the really freeing truth in this story is that Jesus doesn't ask us to get it. Jesus asks us to follow and listen. And if we do, we will, inevitably, find ourselves transformed by the journey.

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<sup>i</sup> See M. Eugene Boring's excursus on Matthean Christology, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* 355

<sup>ii</sup> *Matthew* Douglas R. A. Hare 198

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 24:12-18; also Exodus 19:20

<sup>iv</sup> Again, a reference to Exodus 24:15-18, where God was in the cloud that settled over Mount Sinai.

<sup>v</sup> *Matthew* 3:17

<sup>vi</sup> The 75 cent word for this event is "Christophany," an event in which Jesus is revealed