

Sermon: “What’s the Big Deal about Jesus, Anyway?”

Text: John 3:22-36

Purpose: the purpose of this sermon is to identify the significance of Jesus’ life for humanity and for me (you).

Introduction

- I. Who is Jesus with Humanity?**
 - A. Jesus is Son of God**
 - B. Jesus is Son of Man**
 - C. Jesus is Savior**
- II. Who is Jesus with Me? (You?)**
 - A. Jesus Loves Me (Identity)**
 - B. Jesus Inspires Me (Passion)**
 - C. Jesus Redeems Me (You/Purpose)**

One challenge a pastor has upon arriving at a new parish is remembering the names of everyone. I am making progress, but I hope you will continue to forgive me when I make a mistake. I expressed this concern to a colleague of mine and he made me feel much better. He told me that once he woke up in the middle of the night and could not, for the life of him, remember what his own middle name was. It tugged at his mind and would not let him sleep, so he turned on the light, walked across the room, grabbed his Bible and found his middle name in the inscription. No need to summon Sherlock Holmes! Mystery solved!

In the earlier reading from Philippians, Paul speaks of Christ, in the form of God, before the Incarnation, becoming human. He writes, “(Jesus) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself...being born in human likeness.” What do you suppose that means, “emptied himself?” Among other things, it means that the God of the universe, through whom all things exist, upon whom all depend, himself became a dependent, an infant, unable to lift his head, or speak a word or understand precisely who he was...

...A Christmas Christ, utterly dependent upon awkward, teen-age parents, with less lung capacity than that required for playing a holiday kazoo. How in heaven’s name could such a big God fit into such a tiny stocking-stuffer? How could the dreams and hopes of humanity be so recklessly wagered in a bid for redemption? God, the Christmas Creator, wrapped the nuclear power of the solar system into a single birthday candle and, with a twinkle of the eye, whispered to a band of shepherds, “Hey guys, you might just want to check this out.”

We often ignore this kenosis, this ‘self-emptying’ of Jesus. In our brokenness, we want Jesus to know what he is about, to know how to fix things, to be at the top of his game. The idea that he, too, had to discover his life’s purpose rattles us to the core. Yet, that is precisely what Paul is saying. And how did Jesus (re)discover his missional purpose? By learning how to read, specifically the scriptures, he came to understand the meaning of ‘Messiah.’ Through teaching and the hostility of Jewish religious leaders who resisted his message, he confronted the cost of what he needed to accomplish, and eventually, he made a deliberate choice to embrace the way of the cross in obedient response to God’s direction in his life.

In the words of John Stott, an Anglican theologian, “Despite the great importance of his teaching, his example and his works of compassion and power, none of these was central to (Jesus’) mission. What dominated his mind was not the living, but the giving of his life.” That is why a third of each of the synoptic gospels and half of John’s gospel narrate the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death was the game-changer which redeemed humanity, redeemed me, redeemed you.

The first disciples of Jesus took it for granted that he was truly human. And why wouldn’t they? They spoke with him, traveled with him, joked with him, worked with him, ate with him and shared their fears and dreams with him. He was a remarkable person, but certainly flesh and blood. It wasn’t until after his ascension that some began to question his humanity. But much as they admired Jesus, the disciples did not catch on at first to Jesus’ divine nature as Son of God.

Why would they? Jesus also had to learn this truth about himself, and after many of his miracles, he would say, “Tell no one of this, for my time has not yet come.” Of course, that often did not silence the witnesses, for they could not resist telling the story of what had taken place. The disciples knew, however, that Jesus was not your ‘run-of-the-mill’ preacher. That is why they were drawn to follow him in the first place. He spoke with authority, not like other rabbis. He commanded sea and storm, healed the incurable, multiplied food for the hungry, changed water to wine, delivered from demons, changed lives and raised the dead. Eventually, they came to realize, ‘This was a creature from another time and place.’ “You are the Christ, Peter proclaimed, “the Son of the Living God!”

In the days of the early Church, there were those who came to believe that Jesus was not fully human, that his suffering on the cross was apparent rather than real, and that after his resurrection, he had a spiritual, but not a physical body, a belief known as Docetism. It tended to identify the material world with sin, and therefore, Jesus would have no part of that. “He was Son of God,” they would say, “but not Son of Man.” By denying the

Incarnation of Christ, they threw the baby out with the bath-water. If Jesus was not truly human, how could he understand, much less save the human soul?

I once read of a missionary-physician who dedicated his life to working with lepers in a colony. Often, he lacked medical resources and equipment for treating his patients, so he wrote to colleagues around the world requesting—sometimes begging—for financial and material assistance to continue his vital work. One night while writing such a letter, he started to write, “they” as in “they need your help,” but as he wrote he looked at his hand and noticed the all too familiar symptoms of leprosy on his hand. Though he had followed every precaution, he had, unfortunately, become a leper himself. He paused and took a deep breath. Then he crossed out the ‘they’ and wrote instead, “we need your help.”

That is essentially what God did in becoming the incarnate child of Bethlehem. Though without sin himself, Jesus took on the human condition with its sin and carried it to and through the cross to forgiveness and redemption. Let me describe it another way. Let us suppose you are a judge in a court of law and your best friend from high school comes before you for sentencing. Guilt has been established, and sentence must be served. You have some leeway in your sentence, but the minimum penalty is a ten-thousand dollar fine. You know your friend cannot pay a fine of that sum, so after passing sentence, you step away from the judge’s chair, shed your robe, and come alongside your friend. In your compassion, you pay the fine and commit yourself to seeing that friend through to a rehabilitated life.

This is what John the Baptist meant when his followers were so concerned that the crowds were following after Jesus rather than John, and he said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom...He must increase, but I must decrease.” John understood that Jesus was the bridge between heaven and earth: the gift of God in the heart of humanity.

Alright, I can hear someone saying, but what does that mean for me? Jesus walked this earth 2,000 years ago, and he died unjustly. History is littered with people who died unjustly. How does following Jesus today make a difference in my life? In response, let me tell you some of what Jesus has done for me.

I grew up in a family of 21. My parents had nine biological children (one girl/eight boys) and were foster parents for others, some of whom lived with us for most of their formative years, and others for shorter periods of time. In such a family metropolis, each struggles to find his or her own distinctive place. I was blessed to be #8 in the line-up, which meant that most things had been claimed before I came along. I was, however, inquisitive, philosophical, and eager to discover the purpose of the life I was given.

Even as a child, I found Jesus compelling. I loved the Bible adventures I discovered in Sunday school and books. One day, I noticed that a humidifier in our living room resembled a pulpit. Later that night, when the family gathered in front of the TV set, I rolled the humidifier in front of it and announced we were going to have church instead. My parents were rather amused by their 7-year-old and let me hold my revival meeting. I repeated that on other occasions until one night I made the fatal error of setting my pulpit up in front of the TV just before Monday night football. That time, my Dad was not amused, and my early pulpit career came to a decisive end.

Deep within, I trusted that Jesus loved me, and that sense of identity (knowing that I was a child of God) carried me through times of fear, uncertainty, challenge, triumph, grief and struggle. As I grew older, I also grew in my understanding of the teachings of Jesus. I was captivated by the ethic of his moral compass: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ ‘turn the other cheek,’ ‘pray for those who malign you,’ ‘go the second mile.’ I wanted to be like him, compassionate, prayerful, courageous, friendly and perfect. Wait a minute...Did I say perfect? Yes, I’m afraid I did.

As inspiring as I found Jesus’ ministry to be, I began to care more about ‘looking good’ than ‘being good.’ On the surface, I was optimistic, thoughtful, generous, loyal, hard-working, talented and such, but beneath, I was insecure, self-centered, fearful, hypocritical and very judgmental. I would eventually learn that most of the things we find objectionable in others also exist within our own self, but I could not see that then.

All of this came to a crisis when I was eighteen. I did something I was not proud of, something that shocked even my own sense of rationalization. I looked in the mirror and did not like the hypocrisy I saw. I actually disappeared for three days. I didn’t eat or sleep. I wept a lot, and tried to pray, but every prayer felt hollow and unheard. I was tired. I had tried to impress God with everything I had, but God was not impressed. Finally, I fell asleep—I’m not sure for how long—but as I awoke, I heard a voice external to myself. One of only two times in my life that I actually felt I heard God’s voice, or perhaps I should say Jesus’ voice, because it was a phrase that he speaks in John, chapter 6.

He speaks to his disciples, just after several have fallen away because they found his teaching too difficult to accept. The words are these: “And you, will you leave too?” Reflexively, I responded with the words of Peter from the very next verse, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

In that encounter, I let go—let go of my striving, my attempts to impress, my efforts to save myself. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for my salvation, and I would follow him

into an unknown tomorrow. I became real. I'd like to say that I shed my judgmental attitudes, but that would take many years to reshape. But it was a step—at step toward honesty and integrity, and it happened because Jesus gave his life for me—and you—and anyone who is willing to get real with God. In the words of John Stott, “Before we can see the cross as *for* us (leading us to faith and worship), we have to see it as something done *by* us (leading us to repentance).”

We started with the question, “What’s the big deal about Jesus, anyway?” Let’s end with a reflection on *One Solitary Life*, by James Allen Francis:

“Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place he was born. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial, and was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth – his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

(Twenty) long centuries have come and gone, and today he is the centerpiece of the human race... I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.”