

“Who is Jesus?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2021

Mark 9: 2-9

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Who is Jesus? Who is this mysterious guy who gives sight to the blind, turns over tables, preaches love, calls himself the Son of Man, and raises the dead to life? Who is this person who hangs from a cross one day and then walks out of the tomb the next? Who is this man who has the audacity to forgive his enemy, to humble the powerful, to make us see God?

Six days before Jesus took his disciples up a mountain, he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” They told him that some thought he was John the Baptist; others believed him Elijah returned from heaven; yet others thought he was a prophet. Then Jesus asked them, “And who do *you* say that I am?” Peter alone responded, saying, “You are the Messiah, the Christ.”

Six days later, Jesus is transformed on a mountaintop. A voice proclaims him God’s Son, God’s Beloved. This is our answer. This is who Jesus is. But let’s be honest: that’s not exactly a super clear answer. What does it mean to be God’s Son? What does it mean to be the Messiah?

I don’t want vague theological answers. I don’t want something you can read on any street-corner pamphlet. I want to *know* Jesus. And the early Christians were no different. They didn’t have much to go on: some word-of-mouth stories, letters from Paul, a collection of sayings now lost, perhaps some of the early Gospels such as Mark. The information left a lot of gaps. And so folks, wanting a better understanding of Jesus, started filling in the gaps.

One of my favorite attempts is the non-canonical Infancy Gospel of Thomas, written in the 2nd century CE, at least 100 years after Jesus lived. It tries to imagine what Jesus must have been like as a boy.

The best thing I can compare it to is that *Twilight Zone* episode where a six-year-boy terrorizes a small town with his psychic abilities—the one where the boy forces everyone to smile, and if you think bad thoughts, he banishes you to the cornfield.

According to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, that’s what Jesus was like: a lot of divine power crammed into the ego of a little child. He kills, maims, or injures a staggering number of other children. A kid accidentally runs into him... dead. A boy interferes with

Jesus showing off... withered like a tree. Parents complain... struck blind. When he finally does a good deed and raises a child from the dead, the only reason he does it is so that the child can tell everyone that, no, Jesus did not push him off the ledge, and so, no, Jesus should not get in trouble.

This is not exactly what I had in mind when I said I wanted to know Jesus better, and you can see why the early church excluded this gospel from the New Testament. It is bad PR to have Jesus killing children. Still, this was, despite all of its failings and inaccuracies, an honest attempt to figure out Jesus and how his humanity and divinity interacted.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had to face a lot of different ideas about who he was. Even at his trial, the religious and civil authorities were still trying to figure him out, asking if he was the Son of God or the king of the Jews. In the end, these ideas literally killed him.

Not much has changed. All of us have ideas about who Jesus is and isn't, and we try to cram the witness of Scripture and experience and revelation into these narrow definitions. Everybody has a theory: Jesus is a wisdom teacher; no, he's a social justice activist; no, he's an apocalyptic prophet; no, he's your suburban nice guy; no, he's the ultimate judge; no, he's God incarnate; no, he's a lunatic; no... and it goes on.

Peter had his own ideas too. Peter knew the traditions and stories of his people. He knew that when you experience the presence of God among mortals, you were supposed to build a tabernacle, a kind of lodging, to shelter that epiphany and keep it sacred and set apart. Peter may have thought that this was it—God was about to break into the world and usher in God's kingdom, through Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter, like us, came to the mountain already full of ideas about who Jesus was.

But even as death could not contain Jesus, neither could Peter's ideas. When God speaks on that mountain, God interrupts all the ideas Peter and we have about Jesus; God says there is only one way to know who Jesus is: listen to him. Listen to this person who transcends, who transfigures, human labels and ideas. Let *him* tell you who he is.

There's a reason why we have more than one Gospel, more than one epistle. Because one idea of Jesus isn't enough. Mark was right: Jesus is the suffering and misunderstood Son of God. But Matthew was right too: Jesus is a Jewish teacher of revelation. And Luke was right: Jesus is a radical prophet of inclusion and social upheaval. And John was right: Jesus is God incarnate, the light undimmed before the dark, the Word of creation. And Paul was right: Jesus is the crucified and risen Messiah, whose death and rising secure our salvation.

And more than that: Jesus is the one who speaks peace into your heart when you pray in the quiet of the morning. Jesus is the love that breaks open inside of you when you see a

person living on the street, hungry and alone. Jesus is the voice calling you in the back of your mind, to live your life differently. Jesus is the rush of grace that washes you clean today. Jesus is the one who holds you as you cry late into the night because the pain is so bad, because you miss them so much, because you don't know how to live another day. Jesus is the other day.

Jesus is talking to us all the time. He's telling us who he is. In every word of Scripture. Every prayer. Every exchange of love. Every cry for justice. And he's telling us that he's not an idea. Ideas are too simple, too abstract, too human. He's not an answer on a multiple choice quiz.

He's something far more complex, far more mysterious. He's a person. A person who loves us. And in this person is the God who loves us. He's the place where ideas are left behind, and what remains is grace. And when you know that, I mean when you really know that, you stop worrying about defining Jesus—because you've got something infinitely better. You've got him. You've got his arms wrapped around you. You've got his love. And that's all you need.

We come to the mountain, shedding our ideas and expectations, and we listen to Christ. And once we have had our vision, we must be careful how we teach it. Even then, we do not get to tell the world who Jesus is. We do not get to propagate our little ideas and little theories. We honor the silence that Jesus instructs. Ours is simply to help others get up the mountain too, to help them come to the place where Jesus shines, where he rises from the dead (and our dead ideas), where love abounds.

There, on the mountain, we say, with the apostle Paul, "I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

Nothing but Christ crucified... Christ risen. Risen above all our ideas. Not the Jesus we think he is. But the Jesus we need. **Amen.**