

“Jesus: Word Made Flesh”

September 16, 2018

Back to Basics series

When we talk about Jesus, most of us probably have a picture in our mind. And if we're honest, we tend to picture Jesus as someone who looks like us. Many of us grew up with framed pictures of Jesus – and probably not so accurate in terms of physical appearance. I always picture Jesus' skin tone as much more like Ivan's when he's been in the sun – deep olive – much lighter than mine.

My friend, Karie, who lives in Africa, sent me a collection of postcards that showed Bible stories from an African context. And, all of the characters were African in physical features. We tend to picture Jesus like us – and maybe that's part of the mystery and the blessing of the truth of Jesus who is “Word made flesh.”

Earlier this year, I heard Bishop Will Willimon speak about Jesus. I took a lot of notes. He's a pretty quotable person and a great preacher. He started off saying, “Jesus is the most interesting thing we have to say” to the world. And he's interesting “because he's running around loose.”

I love that phrase! For as much as I sometimes figure that we have Jesus figured out, I'm always wrong. That's part of the mystery when we talk about the Incarnation, too - Jesus, the Word made flesh. Jesus, fully human, “took up room in this world” and saved people - usually the wrong people or at least the ones we didn't expect.

That's the scandal of the Good News: this Jesus, whom we worship and follow, came to be with us and did things that amaze us! The biggest scandal is that he saves us from ourselves and saves us for new life and hope. That's a promise to claim and cling to, but not without a cost.

On Tuesday mornings, we're reading through the Gospel of Mark, and I've been surprised. Jesus is ticking people off - a lot! He's going against the religious establishment, offending them at every turn, and doing everything he can to make them see that God is up to something new!

He's meeting people where they are, encountering people who have been cast aside, engaging with people who have been ignored, and showing the world love that is amazing and surprising. We know how it all turns out, but going through it verse by verse offers an important perspective.

Jesus is both a challenge to the political and religious powers of the day - and a cosmic power. He is deeply engaged in the world - and in the lives of everyday people - and he is God's revelation to the world and reigns with God. He is fully human and fully divine.

Jesus pushes us still. Loving church and enjoying being together isn't enough. He tells us to follow him; he doesn't say, "Think about me." Following means going where he goes and doing what he does. Willimon said, "It would've been easier if Jesus would've stayed quiet, shut up, and located - stayed still. But he's on the loose, and he reigns."

We're going back to basics and looking at the foundations of our faith, including the Apostles' Creed, which took its current form in the 400s AD. Today we move from "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth" to "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord..." Right away, there's something specific - Jesus is a name that means "Savior," and it was probably a common name at the time. It was a derivative of Joshua, and Jesus wasn't the only Jesus running around! Christ is a title. Christ means Messiah or Anointed One - the Promised One of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is more than a prophet or a moral teacher. He is Christ.

Today the cross is a symbol of Christian faith. You may notice that crosses look a bit different from church to church or tradition to tradition. In Orthodox and Catholic churches, we tend to see the crucified Christ - Jesus on the cross. In many Protestant churches, the cross is empty. Some say it's a difference in looking at crucifixion or looking at resurrection as the ground of our faith. Both are important to our understanding of Jesus. But the cross hasn't always been the most prevalent symbol for Christians.

SHOW SLIDE: ICHTHUS

The Greek word *ichthus* was an early symbol for Christians. *Ichthus* means "fish," which is where we get the fish symbol from. It became a teaching tool for an early creed.

Iota is the first letter of the name Jesus in the Greek alphabet.

X, or *Chi*, is the first letter for "Christ."

O, the letter *Theta*, is the first letter for the Greek term for God.

Y, or *Upsilon*, represents "Son," and

E, or *Sigma*, is for Savior.

Together they form a phrase that's like a creed:

Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter or *Jesus Christ God's Son Savior*

It makes sense - Jesus called his disciples (some of them fishermen) to come and fish for people. He fed the crowd loaves and fish from the young boy's lunch. The connection to baptism by water was and still is a mark and means of grace.

Tertullian, from the 2nd century, said this: "we, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthus, Jesus Christ, are born in the water." According to an ancient story, when a

Christian met a stranger in the road, the Christian sometimes drew one arc of the simple fish outline in the dirt. If the stranger drew the other arc, they knew they were in good company. Now we see them on cars or shirts or businesses as witness of faith. But be careful when you put on the label!

Jesus is God's only Son, which speaks to Jesus being fully divine and having a special relationship with God. John's Gospel is the last to be written, and his take is different than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John echoes Genesis to claim that Jesus is the Word - *Logos* - who was in the beginning with God. Jesus is God Incarnate - in the flesh - embodied - so that we might understand the grace and truth of God. I like that phrase from *The Message* - Jesus "moved into the neighborhood."

Last week, we encountered Moses who encountered God at the burning bush and had to take off his shoes because he came up against God's holiness and glory. Frederick Buechner says, "The Incarnation is untheological, unsophisticated, and undignified." Jesus gets earthy and messy and comes to where we are, and we don't have to be worried that he doesn't get it. Buechner adds, "All ground is holy because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it."

The focus of the creed is who Jesus is - fully divine in this holy, special birth - and fully human in his violent death and burial. Jesus is fully divine - resurrection is real, ascension into heaven is real, and the reality of his coming again is something we wait for with hope. There's not a lot of focus on what Jesus did in terms of ministry, and yet that's where we see God's grace and truth clearly - in healing and teaching, in the crowds who come to him, in lives transformed by the love of God at work in him.

Jesus brings salvation, and that's worth unpacking. If we want to claim Jesus as Savior, we have to talk about sin - anything we do or say or think that does not love God or love neighbor. With that definition, we're all in the same boat. Yes, Jesus died on a cross to show the depth of God's love and grace for us. His death forgives sin, but it's more than that. The prayer is that a relationship with Jesus - Savior - changes who we are so that we're moving away from sin and moving toward holiness, which is a good Methodist term. Claiming that Jesus is Savior means that we understand our need to be saved from sin and saved for new life where we love God and neighbor more fully. Jesus makes that possible.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, living a fairly wealthy Greek city, probably in the early 60s AD, he includes these words, which is probably an early hymn about Jesus.

SHOW SLIDE: Philippians 2: 5-11 (New Living Translation)

⁵You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. ⁶Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. ⁷Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared

in human form, ⁸he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. ⁹Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We hear the mystery of the Incarnation - and the power of it. We find joy when we serve like Jesus did, and we recognize him as Lord of our lives. The creed also calls Jesus "Lord," which can mean "king." We heard God self-identify as "Lord" when he met Moses. By Jesus' time, "Lord" was also used for the person in charge - whether in the home, city, kingdom, or empire. It was a title reserved for human authorities, so to give the title to Jesus was a powerful challenge to the order of things.

If we're honest, it still is. To say, "Jesus is Lord" means that nothing else and no one else is. And yet, how often we struggle to allow Jesus to really be Lord of our lives. How many times do we place our trust in other things or other people - or believe that anything or anyone else can do what God in Christ can do?

Faith in Jesus isn't believing something that unbelievable, but trusting in what's real and trustworthy. God is real. God can be trusted. God wants a relationship with you and me so much that he came to be with us in Jesus. Jesus lived, and his ministry transformed lives. He died, and his death demonstrated God's great love and our need for salvation. His resurrection shows us that death doesn't have the last word, and there's hope. And it's for any of the "dead" places in our lives - or those circumstances that feel totally hopeless. Resurrection means that there's always hope.

In Jesus, God is saying that God is real and with us, that we matter to God, and that we are loved beyond our wildest imagination. It was Karl Barth, a famous and prolific theologian, who offered his own creed. When someone asked him to summarize his many volumes of theological work, everything he had offered for the sake of Christian theology, he said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Why does Jesus matter to you? Why should Jesus matter to someone else? Again, if you're a writer, write it down. If you're a talker, record it somehow. And if you have questions about what it means to follow Jesus, to trust in that love of God for you, to claim that relationship with Jesus, please come and talk more about it. I invite us to pray together...

Dear God, thank you for showing yourself to us in Jesus. Whether we feel confident in trusting you or whether we feel like we're wavering, guide us to deeper

grace and truth. Continue to work in our hearts, and help us to trust in you more and more each day...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE