

Jesus Bad Day Sermon
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David's United Church of Christ, Kettering, OH
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This morning, I want to address two questions that came to me about the person of Jesus, that I think are both related to the Christian belief that in this one person we have met the embodiment of God's love, and the very human face of God. Said another way, Christians have come to affirm that if we want to speak of God, what God desires, values, and calls us to as people of faith, our best picture is found in the life and teaching of the one we know as Jesus of Nazareth.

In theology, we refer to this as the Incarnation, or more technically as the Hypostatic Union – which is technical language for the idea that Christians came to believe that while Jesus was entirely and utterly human, he also held within his one being the divine nature, or to use the language of early believers, Jesus' followers came to believe he was the Son of God, and thus the second person of the Holy Trinity.

The questions I hope to address came at this issue from different places. One asked why we have a genealogy in Matthew that runs through the family line of Joseph, if Christian creeds proclaim that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth? That's a fair question, right?

The second question asked about those times when Jesus appears to act in ways that are less than admirable, for instance: Jesus is rude to his parents, especially his mother; he angrily cursed an innocent fig tree and it died; he talked smack about his critics, even called them unkind names; he got violent when he overturned the money changers tables and chased them from the Temple with a whip; when he called the Syro-Phoenician woman a "dog" and only helped her by healing her sick child after she beat him in an argument; and so on. "How do we love a fallible Jesus, or how do we love Jesus when he's having a bad day?" Again, another fair question.

So to begin with, let's talk about some of the doctrine that grew up around that understanding of Jesus' identity and person in the pre-scientific age of the earliest church when many of the creeds were formed and eventually the texts were collected into a canon of literature, a library if you will that we call the New Testament of the Bible. We should acknowledge how faith evolved, how early followers of Jesus moved from their experience of God while in Jesus' presence and community to language that sought to explain the experience. Sometimes that language captures truth for all time and, as is true of all language, sometimes it captured the best thinking of people at a certain age, but that fails

to communicate the intended message of truth in the ages to come. The message must, if you will, evolve with the growing understanding of later generations.

In that spirit then, let me share the words of pastor and author Frederick Buechner in his book *The Faces of Jesus*, writing about the attempt of those who came to love Jesus and his teachings to speak of his birth, acknowledging the understanding of that culture that great people must have had a supernatural or extraordinary birth story. He writes that "the ancient prophecies foretold, it is a virgin who is to bear the holy child. 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee,' the angel announces, 'and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.' It is not old Joseph but God who is the father. Paul, Mark, Matthew, the earliest writers about Jesus say nothing of a virgin birth, but by the time Luke wrote his Gospel, it had come to seem that nothing less wonderful could account for the wonders he was gospeling. This extraordinary life could have had a beginning no less extraordinary. History creates heroes, but saints seem to arrive under their own steam. Evil evolves, but holiness happens."

Buechner goes on to speak of the Nativity with a literary comparison from the first scene in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, which takes place at Christmas time. Marcellus is extolling the virtues of the season to his friends... he says:

"Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is this time."

Buechner adds, "It is a *hallowed* time, (Marcellus) says, a holy time, a time in which life grows still like the surface of a river so that we can look down into it and see glimmering in its depth something timeless, precious, other. And a *gracious* time, Marcellus says – a time that we cannot bring about as we can a happy time or a sad time but time that comes upon us as grace, as a free and unbidden gift. Marcellus explains that Christmas is a time of such holiness that the cock crows the whole night through as though it is perpetually dawn, and thus for once, even the powers of darkness are powerless.

"Horatio's answer is equally instructive. 'So have I heard and do *in part* believe,' he says to Marcellus, thus speaking, one feels, not just for himself but for Shakespeare and for us. In part believe it. At Christmas time it is hard even for the unbeliever not to believe in something, if not in everything. Peace on earth, good will to (all); a dream of innocence that is good to hold onto even if it is only

a dream; the mystery of being a child; the possibility of hope – not even canned carols piped out over the shopping center parking plaza from Thanksgiving on can drown it out entirely.”

Then Buechner gets at the deeper truth that the Gospel texts indicate as well, he writes, “For a moment or two, the darkness of disenchantment, cynicism, doubt, draw back at least a little, and all the usual worldly witcheries lose something of their power to charm. Maybe we cannot manage to believe the Christmas story with all our hearts. But as long as the moment lasts, we can at least believe that it is of all things the one most worth believing. And that may not be as far as it sounds from what belief is. For as long as the moment lasts, that hallowed, gracious time.”

“...The story of the birth of Jesus has been subjected” Buechner continues, “to the most critical scrutiny by believers and unbelievers alike, and nowhere have the Nativity passages of Matthew and Luke been more rigorously and objectively analyzed than within the purview of biblical scholarship, where no fact or claim has been allowed to go unchallenged...”

(Yet when all is considered), writes Buechner, “for twenty centuries there have been untold numbers of men and women who, in untold numbers of ways, have been so grasped by the child who was born, so caught up in the message he taught, and the life he lived, that they have found themselves profoundly changed by their relationship to him. And they have gone on proclaiming, as the writers of the Gospels proclaimed before them, that through the birth of Jesus a life-giving power was released into the world which to their minds could have been no less than the power of God himself. This is the central truth that Matthew and Luke are trying to convey in their accounts of the Nativity. And it was a truth which no language or legend seemed too extravagant to convey. What the birth meant – meant to them, to the world – was the truth that mattered to them most and when all is said and done... perhaps the only truth that matters to anyone.”

So one of the challenges for us, today, in speaking of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of history, is that apart from the Bible, very little was said about him. And yet his impact on the world, certainly on Western civilization and culture is unavoidable, the calendar itself was designed to point to his birth (even if the Pope who gave us B.C. and A.D. actually got his birth year wrong. Oops!).

Over a hundred years ago, Albert Schweitzer – then one of the leaders in an early movement to seek out the Historical Jesus – said, “He comes to us as one unknown.” And writing just 20 years later, noted New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann concurred, stating: “I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.”

But the recent slate of scholarship in and around the Jesus Seminar have become more confident in what they can claim to know, from within sacred scripture and from external studies of the world Jesus inhabited, the Palestine during the occupation by the Roman Empire. Writing just 20 years ago, living NT scholar N.T. Wright has said, "We can know quite a lot about Jesus; not enough to write a modern-style biography, including the color of the subject's hair, and what he liked for breakfast, but quite a lot."

But what we know is what we can learn in the Gospels of the New Testament, and it's important, to hold in mind what these ancient documents are, and of course what they are not. The Gospels are not accurate written histories documenting the events of Jesus' life objectively by any conceivable modern standard. They are not biographies, by any current definition of the word.

As Dom Crossan says, they are "According to's," written by differing anonymous writers associated with a variety of different Christian communities. Mark the earliest was written about 40 years after the time of Jesus, so it is obviously not an eye-witness account, but the accumulated oral traditions that had been circulated among early believers. Matthew & Luke come another 20 years or so later, and rely on the essential timeline of Mark, adding common materials for a source that scholars have called Q (from the German word, *quelle*, meaning "source"), which explains those times when the two Gospel writings have similar material that is not in Mark, like Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and a variety of lessons and parables. John is the latest Gospel and, unlike the other 3 that are called the synoptics because they share a similar view, comes from a later, more formalized tradition, and is very different in many ways.

So, what the New Testament Scriptures, primarily the Gospels are, is an attempt by their authors to help people understand and experience the person of Jesus for themselves, for Jesus had been and continued to be transformative in the lives of the early Christian community, by the active presence of the Spirit. The very word, Gospel means "Good News," so these Gospels are attempts to express very quickly and in compressed form what followers of Jesus had come to believe about him and what his life had come to mean to them.

Over time, and through their experiences of Jesus, people of faith who had followed him, who experienced his teaching, his healing, his amazing and unorthodox interactions with people, and then saw the impact he had had on their lives and others were witnessing to others about this experience. These books are an attempt to write down what had become a life changing event and process so that others might experience the same thing in their own lives.

So, why is there a genealogy following the family line of Joseph back to King David if we are to hold that Joseph was not the actual father of Jesus? Quite simply, perhaps, because the writer of Matthew wanted his Jewish readers to equate the life and teaching of Jesus with the Messiah that they had come to expect from the line of David. The idea of Jesus being born of a virgin may be the result of a mistranslation in the Greek version of the Hebrew called the Septuagint, which would have been commonly read in the time of the two writers that include birth narratives of Jesus, Matthew and Luke. In Isaiah (7: 14) the Hebrew Bible says, "Look, a young woman (or maiden) is with child and will bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel," but in the Greek translation it became, "Look, a virgin is with child..." The focus on a virgin birth then could have been the result of a simple error in translation, or... it may be just as the writers wrote it, it could have been a commonly known fact. We just can't know, and scholars disagree on both sides of this argument. And never mind that the two stories in Matthew and Luke have a variety of contradictions that we don't have time to go into today, let's just say that they see the birth of Jesus very differently.

So one of the challenges we have in speaking intelligently about Jesus in our modern era, has to do with our willingness or difficulty in embracing the sometimes supernatural acts that are attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Not only do we have the healings, and the miracle of multiplying a happy meal into an all you can eat buffet for over 5000 on a hillside, but there are also stories about Jesus turning water into wine, and walking on water, although there's no telling if the people who saw Jesus walking on water had been drinking some of that water turned to wine.

When I posted on Facebook that I was preaching about Jesus, one of our members was being a bit of a wise-ass and said he was looking forward to me explaining the Hypostatic Union in 20 minutes or less... I joked back, would you settle with, "it's a mystery?" I wish it was 20 minutes or less, and so do you, I know.

But that's what it comes down to really when we talk about Jesus, isn't it? What it is that we can make of Jesus, the person at the center of Christianity, the person upon which this entire faith enterprise is hung... both literally and figuratively. What do Christians mean when we say that Jesus is the Son of God, do we choose to emphasize his divinity over his humanity – with a focus on his miracles and supernatural acts and reported knowledge of seemingly unknowable things, and the assurance that he indeed has God present in him so that he can say things like "I am the way, the truth & the Life, no one comes to the Father but by me," the way he does the Gospel according to John.

Or are we more inclined to speak of Jesus as the human who has come to embody God's love as one who is like us, who knows what it is like to stub one's toe, who has felt the hurt of betrayal by beloved friends, who faces life with uncertainty, and experiences judgment as well as physical torment and death, and prays to God that this cup might be lifted from him, who communes with God yet dines with sinners and common folk rather than embracing the self-righteous religious elite of his day, who was never holier than thou but invited all his friends and followers to the welcome table of food and fellowship?

And while we might be inclined to choose the more relatable human God one day, and on different days and circumstances choose the Jesus who intervenes and heals because of our brokenness and need, how do we speak of Jesus as one person who held within his own being both natures? Human and divine, which gratefully, to their credit, the early church fathers (and mothers) who developed refused to let of one or diminish the other.

One place I like to start then is to be reminded myself how faith developed and came to be in the lives of his earthly disciples and followers, the women and men who walked with him in this life and came to believe that when they were with him they were in the very presence of God, for these are the people who continued to tell the stories of his life and teaching, retelling the parables he taught, recounting the miracles and acts of mercy they saw, retelling the stories of Jesus so as to attract others to the faith, and to remind each other of all that he had said and done so as to encourage one another to keep the faith. If these people had not experienced a life changing knowledge of God through Jesus, and continued to share that experience with others, inviting them to come to know God through Jesus and commit to become a part of his church, we would not be here today, we would not know about this Jesus, at all. For the only reason that we are Christians today, and know anything at all about Jesus is that they held on to the faith, they had been transformed and there was no turning back.

So what was it that drew people to him in the first place, and what made them continue in the faith after Jesus was gone? At first, like many of us, I'm sure they came to Jesus looking for a quick solution for a problem in their life. Some were hungry and he fed them; others were sick and he healed them; some had become lost in their own lives, the paths they had chosen in life had become a dead end and hopeless, they needed another way, and they found in Jesus an authentic person who embodied the love of God for all people. For them he had literally become the way, the truth and the life.

He told stories and parables that drew from the world around them, the experiences that they were familiar with in life, the things they could see with their own eyes, and yet he brought an uncanny sense of compassion and

acceptance to them through these stories. A wedding feast where the most successful and attractive people weren't the guests of honor, but rather, they were, the common street people, the poor, the broken and the needy. He spoke of God's abundant harvest, how there was enough love and grace and kindness for all people, about a lost sheep that the shepherd went out and found, a father who doesn't punish his prodigal son or diminish the older brother's desire, but goes out to each one and seeks to gather them in as one family... on and on, again and again, they spoke of Jesus, and how he was with them often at the table, in the breaking of the bread, and in the sharing of the cup. In those moments when they thought about it, they came to understand that when they were with Jesus, their hearts were "strangely warmed," and they knew that being with Jesus was like being with God. So, perhaps, some of the supernatural stories are an attempt to explain the transformation that they had experienced, or perhaps they remembered those stories exactly as they happened. They are not reproducible, we can't walk on water, or turn water to wine... although I know a priest in St. Louis who has convinced his congregation that he can turn water into beer, but that's another story altogether. As Buechner suggested we may only in part believe, but like Jesus' early disciples we too can seek to follow his teachings, and in each of our lives experience some sense of the transformation, love and acceptance of which they speak.

After Jesus was gone, and they had come through the experience of the Pentecost, early Christians bound together, because they learned that when they came together to speak about Jesus, and to practice the things he had taught them – to love and serve others, to share what they had, to bring healing, forgiveness and grace to one another – whenever two or three were gathered together in his name, he was in the midst of them, and he was never more in their midst than when they shared a meal at table, breaking the bread, passing the cup, in remembrance of him, as he had taught them.

In short, these people had come newly alive through their contact with Jesus, when they recalled what he said, and tried to emulate the things that he taught them, others were drawn in to the community, others wanted to be apart of it, they wanted to hear the stories – tell us again the one about the Good Samaritan, tell us about the farmer who went out to plant grain for the harvest, or the one about the workers in the field when some worked only an hour or two at the end of the day, but all were paid the same as those who worked the whole day, enough to get by, a day's wage... tell us the stories of Jesus, because when they retold the stories, when they remembered what he said and what he had done, it still warmed their hearts, it still brought them closer to God, it still provided for them the way, the truth and the Life that was worth living.

To begin with, these folk weren't guided by a theology, or a system of beliefs that sought to resolve all the questions that were raised by their experience, they

were guided by their experience of a person, of Jesus of Nazareth. And because he was a person, no system of thinking or belief could ever completely capture or contain him. He had rough edges that would not be easily rubbed down to a smooth finish. Eventually, a theology would be necessary, eventually they would have to try to explain what it meant that God had come to humanity in the form of this one person, but their attempts to explain it all would rise out of the person they had come to know, and still believed could be known in the life and practice of the faith as a church, in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. Just saying it was the "hypostatic union" of the human and divine was no answer, no real help, because, as I said, it is and it remains a mystery.

So it is in that context that I read the words of scripture, and while I admit my modern, scientific mind finds it very difficult to believe all the supernatural events as they are described there, I find I am strangely comforted by the side of Jesus that is so profoundly human, that at times we see that he has had a bad day. He gets tired. He gets hungry. He hallucinates in the wilderness when he was tired and hungry. He curses a poor fig tree, and even his opponents in the Pharisees, calling them names. He does get cross with the religious elite who look down their noses at others, and yes, he did toss the tables and chase out the money-changers with a whip, and some days I envy his ability to act out of righteous indignation in ways I know I should not.

The Bible is a human document that speaks to us of the experiences of an ancient people, and as such it contains errors and contradictions, but consistently it strives to point us in the direction of a loving and grace-full God, best seen and known, Christians believe, in the person of Jesus. Do we have room for a Jesus who uses a racial epithet with a woman seeking healing for her child, and gets it wrong, I think, before he learns from the encounter and responds positively and does as the woman asks? Can we except a human savior who makes such a mistake, and learns from it, and becomes more clear and loving because of it? Matthew obviously thinks we can, and in the end I'm grateful to have a portrait of God that I can relate to, who lives, and loves, and when mistaken learns and loves better and more completely. I find my heart strangely warmed by that image, it points me in the direction of a God who lays before us human life that is the way, and has the truth about it. Jesus is also the radical teacher who said blessed are the peacemakers, and taught his disciples to turn the other cheek rather than respond with violence. He showed God's love for the least of these, and the more I read about him, the more I want to be like him.

In the end then, I accept that when I read the Bible I'm reading a less than complete or scientifically accurate expression of who Jesus was and is, and I accept that some of the story I find there is going to feel too good to be true. Perhaps Jesus is at times too human to follow, and at others too supernatural to believe in, yet I cannot turn away. Like Horatio, I may only be able at times to

understand or to believe in part, but for the rest of it, I have to admit I take some comfort in the idea that indeed it is a mystery, and more is yet to be revealed, for God is still speaking.

Amen.