

Sermon: October 17, 2021

“The Word”

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7, John 1:1-14

“Do you know Jesus?” asked my four-year old neighbor, Annie. We had just moved from Riverdale, MD into our new house in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania and Annie’s family had come over to welcome us to the neighborhood. It was one of the first things Annie said to my brother and me, “Do you know Jesus?” I remember thinking it was an odd question. Sure, I had a vague idea of who Jesus was, but how do you actually know Jesus? That question would begin a friendship, the consequences of which were really what led to the path that brought me to this pulpit. Without that question from little Annie, I might not be your pastor today. It stays with me still: Do you know Jesus?

When Annie died a few years later of a rare form of childhood leukemia, I grieved for the first time in my life—I was 10. And as I grieved, I thought about how sure Annie was that she was going to see Jesus. I sat in my room crying, missing my best friend, and as I looked out my bedroom window, that question came back to my mind: Do you know Jesus?

When I was baptized at a campground, when I taught Sunday school, when I did my first pastoral care visits in college, when I started seminary, when I began to pastor my first church, when I graduated seminary, when I was ordained, when I was called to be your pastor... at each of these formative moments the question returned: Do you know Jesus?

Then, as I sat down to write this sermon and considered everything I have ever learned about the 21st century Palestinian Jew through whom we are

saved and from whom we learned how to live, again, Annie's voice came into my head: Do you know Jesus?

Whenever we say the Apostle's Creed, which we will recite together again, next week, we say what "we," the church, believe about Jesus:

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

This paragraph is part of that much beloved creed that connects Christians across the centuries, and it is good that we should take a closer look at it in our worship together. As I stated last week, we're not interested in the "what" of our belief as much as we are the "why." *Why* do we believe what we believe? *Why* do we feel so passionately about the words of Apostle's or any other creed? *Why* does it matter what we say we believe about God, the Creator, Son, and Spirit?

Last week, we talked about God, the Creator. This week, we turn our focus to Jesus Christ, God's Son, through whom we have our salvation.

Jesus of Nazareth, God incarnate, who came to us as the lowly infant in the manger, a child born of a poor refugee family seeking safety in a world out to kill their firstborn.

Immanuel, God with us, who the gospel called John informs us is the Word, the one who was begotten, but not made.

The Word, who is one in being with God the creator.

The Light, who came to teach us that among all commandments the greatest is love of God and love of Neighbor.

Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life.

The problem with a sermon that addresses all the statements made about Jesus in the Creed is that the Creed states so many things that a 15-minute sermon can't possibly examine them all and give them the attention they properly deserve. So, as I sat down to write this sermon, I had to think carefully about what it is we should really be talking and thinking about. If the purpose of this sermon series is to provoke us to examine what we believe and why, perhaps the best thing to do when we talk about Jesus is to look at the big claims. I know there are people who struggle with the virgin birth, but I don't think many of those people are in this room. In the Creed, the purpose of mentioning that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary is quite simple: it's to point to his divinity as well as his humanity. He is fully God and fully human—these two statements allow us to begin to envision him that way even if our minds can't completely understand what it means to be wholly more than one thing.

Yes, Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, under the violent oppression of the Roman Empire, and he was crucified, died and was buried.

We believe he descended to the dead and that on the third day he rose again, ascended to heaven to be with God, the Creator, and that someday Jesus will come again.

But we believe much more about Jesus than this. When we say we believe in Jesus, we are moving beyond belief in the salvation of our souls: because Jesus wasn't just concerned with this. When we say we believe in Jesus, we are saying we believe the world is worth saving. We are saying that we believe in a way of life that can change everything not just for us, but for every living being.

Sister Joan Chittister who I talked a bit about last week reminds us that "Jesus stands before us [as] the clearest, sharpest, most abundant picture we have of the face of God. And how can we be sure of that," she asks? "Because Jesus is what we know in our hearts God must surely be: compassionate, just, merciful, loving, and on the other side of every boundary" (*In Search of Belief*, p. 67).

Jesus didn't sit in the midst of the action waiting for people to come to him. He went to the people. He reached across every boundary put in front of him whether cultural, familial, religious or otherwise. It wasn't that Jesus didn't respect boundaries, it's that Jesus didn't honor those which were unjust, those that placed walls between the "us" and the "them," those that kept us from loving one another.

The prophet Isaiah tells us in chapter 43 what lengths God will go to for God's people: the Message translation says it this way, "Don't be afraid,

I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end—because I am your God, the Holy of Israel, your Savior. I paid a huge price for you... *That's* how much you mean to me. *That's* how much I love you... So don't be afraid: I'm with you." As I sat down to plan this worship service, this passage came back to me—and it's because this is what God did through Jesus. God came to be with us in all the over-our-headness, all the rough waters, between the rocks and hard places—God is with us.

God always has been. We can see this in the creation of the worlds. We see this throughout the story of the Israelites. It's communicated throughout scripture. John's gospel tells us that Immanuel, God with us, wasn't made, he has always been. The Word made flesh, the Light we are to live by. This is Jesus: The Light that cannot be extinguished.

There is no one scripture that adequately sums up all of Jesus's saving acts. And he doesn't just save souls, my friends, though that's what we often mean when we speak of his saving power. We talk a lot about saving the world in our culture. We all want the world to be saved, but we all act like we don't know how that can ever get done. And yet, Jesus showed us how to do that very thing primarily through his relationships with people. In a time when he should not have done so, he spoke with the Samaritan woman, he healed lepers, ate with those society could not accept, welcomed the little children, and cared for the least of these. Any one of these scripture stories gives us a glimpse into the heart of God, but it is Jesus pointing to and *living into* the two greatest commands that shows us

exactly what Jesus, what God values above all else: love. Full-hearted, devoted, mighty love of God and love of neighbor. Through Jesus, we see very clearly what 1 John states so simply: God is love.

And yet, the question returns to me: Do I know Jesus?

You know what Annie, I think I do.

I know Jesus in the child that stands up for the smaller kid on the playground.

I know Jesus in the soldier who gives a young refugee child a sip from his canteen.

I know Jesus in the volunteer firefighter who goes back into the burning house to rescue someone else who's trapped.

I know Jesus in the youth of this church who brought in money from their own piggy banks to provide an alpaca for a poor family in Ecuador.

I know Jesus in the people gathering week after week next door to provide food to the hungry.

I know Jesus through the prayer shawls and food bags this church blesses each and every month and will do again today.

I know Jesus in the memory of my friend, who at four-years-old taught me the value of that very question, of asking it, and of living into it day after day after day.

In his book *Creed*, Adam Hamilton notes the great Swiss theological titan, Karl Barth's response when asked how he would sum up his theological work. He responded, Hamilton writes, in "the words of a song his mother had taught him as a child: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

Why do we believe what we believe about Jesus? Is it simply because of what the Bible tells us? Or is it deeper? Could it be because we are a people of hope? We are a people who dare to hope for a world where we can see Jesus in the faces of those we come into contact with and be Jesus to the people who need him most. We are a people who place our hope in a God who loves us so much, God would come to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to teach us how to love and to rescue a broken, hurting world.

We believe what we believe because if God loves us enough to send us Jesus, we know we're going to be okay and that God will always be with us. Hamilton ends his chapter on Jesus this way, "Yes, Jesus loves me. Jesus loves you, too. And that makes all the difference."

Do I know Jesus? Most days, I think I do. On the days I'm unsure, I go searching and there Jesus always is. Making a difference in the world, one person at a time. Amen.