



Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith

Who is Jesus?



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Earlier this week, my wife, Susan, and I were walking the dog, and, as we made our way around the block, I was explaining our summer preaching series. “It’s called Questions of Faith,” I said, “and, every week, the preacher will address one specific question of theology. I’m kicking it off this Sunday by reflecting on the question: Who is Jesus?”

And then, after pausing for a moment, I asked Susan: “What would you want to hear in a sermon about who Jesus is? What would you want to know? What would you want to learn?”

We continued walking for a bit, as Susan thought that over, until, finally, she stopped. “I think I know who Jesus is,” she said, “so does that mean I don’t have to go to church on Sunday?” (And, that from the Rector’s wife!)

But, her answer made me curious. I wanted to know who she thought Jesus is, so I asked her, and Susan said Jesus shows us the way God wants us to live. He’s a guide, a role model, the measuring stick by which we can judge our actions. We should all try to follow Jesus, and be like Jesus, and act like Jesus. It’s like that old slogan WWJD – what would Jesus do? That’s who Jesus is.

Susan is not alone in feeling that way. Many people around the world see Jesus as a moral or ethical guide. Even people outside the Christian faith see something special in Jesus, some even consider him a prophet, and, if we look at Jesus’ life, it’s not hard to understand why.

Jesus was born in the Middle East, during the reign of Herod the Great, and he grew up with his parents, Mary and Joseph, in the small town of Nazareth, about 90 miles north of Jerusalem. Sometime during his late 20’s, Jesus went to see John the Baptist, who became a sort of mentor to Jesus, and, a few years later, following in the footsteps of John, Jesus began his own ministry, travelling to all of the cities and villages in Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.

But then, Jesus made a fateful decision. He decided to take his message to Jerusalem.

His ministry had already angered the Jewish authorities, because Jesus didn’t do things their way, and now, he openly challenged the Jewish leaders in front of the crowds gathered for Passover. This only angered the Jews even further, and, as the tension between the Jewish leaders and Jesus increased, it drew the attention of the Roman occupation, ultimately sealing Jesus’ fate, and leading to his crucifixion on the cross, a form of death the Romans used for traitors, and rebels, and slaves.

Jesus’ ministry only lasted about three years, and yet, his care, and compassion, and respect for every human being changed the world. Jesus opened his heart to everyone, no matter who they were, but particularly, to the sick and the poor, the lost and the lonely, the outcast and the forgotten. In Jesus, people experienced the love of God like they never had before. They felt seen, and heard, and valued, so we can understand why so many people consider Jesus as a “good teacher,” as it says in the Bible, someone who reflects the goodness of God, someone whom we should all emulate, someone we should listen to and follow.

But, as Christians, we take it even further than that. We make some unique claims about Jesus. More than seeing Jesus as merely a good person and role model, we believe Jesus was both fully human and fully divine – just as human as you and I are right now, but also God from God, light from light, true God from true God.

And, while we know Jesus really did live and die, we also believe he rose again, resurrected by God on the third day and then appearing to his disciples in the days afterwards.

These beliefs about Jesus are articulated in the Nicene Creed, which we recite every Sunday, and which you can find on page six of your bulletin, and I know these beliefs are reflected in the way you would answer the question: “Who is Jesus?” Because, when I have asked that question before, the answers I’ve heard most often at here at Grace are: Son of God, or, my Savior.

But, I also know many of you find these claims about Jesus to be difficult and challenging. How can Jesus be fully human and fully divine all at the same time? How did God raise Jesus from the dead? Those things are just not possible. They don’t make any sense. How do you know? How do you know it’s true?

We can begin searching for answers to those big, important questions with what Jesus said about himself. Jesus said he existed before Abraham, which is like saying he existed before time itself, and he claimed to be one with God, to be the Messiah, the Son of God.

And, we can look at what the disciples, and others who met Jesus, had to say about him. Peter hailed Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Thomas put away his questions and doubts to proclaim, “My Lord and my God.” And, at the foot of the cross, the centurion who watched Jesus die is remembered for saying, “Truly, this man was God’s son.”

We can also look to the other Christians who have gone before us in our faith, the millions and millions of people who fervently believed these claims about Jesus. There was the apostle Paul, who never knew the living Jesus, but had such a profound encounter with the risen Christ, he spent the rest of his life preaching and teaching about Jesus. There were the Christian martyrs, people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero, who were so dedicated in their faith, they were willing to give their own lives for their beliefs about Christ. And then, there were the saints of God, people through whom the light of God brightly shined, people like Francis of Assisi, and Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These were regular people who wrestled with the faith, just like you and me, people who had their questions and their doubts, yet, in the end, lived lives of exemplary service in Jesus’ name.

All of these people testify to the truth about Jesus, who he was and what he did. But, there comes a time when we all have to decide for ourselves. I can tell you who I believe Jesus is, and Rev. Amanda can tell you what she believes, and Rev. Richard can tell you what he believes – we do, Sunday after Sunday – but, at some point, deep in your heart, you have to answer the question for yourself: Who is Jesus?

The good news is: no matter how you respond, Jesus is still going to love you. Jesus is that generous, that caring, that loving. He’ll meet us wherever we are on our spiritual journey. He just wants to know us, and have us know him, that he’ll take as we are, with all of our questions and our doubts, our foibles and our quirks, our brokenness and our imperfection. That is what’s so amazing about Jesus. That’s who Jesus is.

Amen.