

**August 27**

**Jesus**

**John 1:1-5**

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup> in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.**

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking.

I was first introduced to St. Francis of Assisi in the 1970's when the movie "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" hit the theaters. Hardly a blockbuster, I went to the movie because my sister said a guy gets naked in it. Up to that point I knew nothing about St. Francis other than some of my Catholic friends had a statue of him with a bird resting in his hand in their flower beds. The movie moved me profoundly. Yes, there was a naked man, in fact, it was Francis who de-robed as he renounced his wealth, his privilege, and his honor as a decorated soldier. He walked away from it all, buck naked. The life he walked into was a life of poverty and devotion to God based on compassion and love for all creation. Prone to mystical experiences of God, he was known to many as a holy man who lived his life trusting in God. He was so compelling that people joined him in his pursuit of the divine.

The movie was mystical, and beautiful, and deeply spiritual. The movie version of what he taught and who he became captivated me and changed me. I can't quite explain it. Years later, in seminary, I had the opportunity to write a paper on an influential person in Christian history, and naturally, I chose Francis, an Italian man who was born in 1182. When I told my professor I wanted to research Francis, he responded with cautionary advice. He said, "It is a challenge with Francis to separate the historical person from all the layers of story and experience associated with him." I had no idea what he was talking about. I'm not sure I did figure it out in time to get a decent grade on my paper, but now I understand.

Two well-known stories associated with Francis are the wolf of Rubbio and the story of the birds. The wolf story is that there was a wolf that was terrorizing a town, eating people. Francis intervened when the town wanted to kill the wolf and he talked the wolf into never killing again. The townspeople, in turn, made sure it had enough to eat for the rest of its life. It is also told that Francis preached to a flock of birds, expressing gratitude for their beautiful clothing. They stood in stillness as he walked among them, not leaving until he dismissed them. There was even a story about Francis that near the end of his life he started to develop the marks of a stigmata; his hands and feet bearing the wounds of a crucified Jesus.

It never occurred to me to question these large than life stories.

What my professor was trying to tell me, which I now understand, is that Francis was so beloved by his followers, they created stories about him, and elaborated on experiences of him. They interpreted him. They kept his spirit and essence alive in these stories, making him larger than life, some might even say, making him divine. Clearly, he existed. He was a real person but it is a challenge to separate the real person who lived, from the person he became to those who loved and esteemed him.

It took me another fifteen years to understand that the same is true for Jesus. There is the pre-Easter Jesus, the flesh and blood man that historically existed. And then there is the post-Easter Jesus, which is how Jesus is spoken of in the traditions that developed among his followers after his historical lifetime.<sup>1</sup> The gospels were written in the last third of the first century and they contain both memory and history. Some of what they narrate is early Christian memory of things Jesus said and did. They give us glimpses of the pre-Easter Jesus. They also include the experience that early Christians acquired in the heart and minds of his followers in the years prior to the writing of the gospels.

That is a lot to wrap your brain around. If you look at John's gospel, the one written last, the gospel writer introduces Jesus as the Word, meaning Jesus is the revelation of God. This is John's testimony, his interpretation, of Jesus – this is who Jesus was for John and his community. He was making a claim, a claim that I have no problem making myself, that Jesus was the decisive revelation of God.

A good question to ask is did Jesus understand himself this way? Did he call himself the Messiah or the Son of God, did he believe himself to be divine? Or is this how early Christians came to know him?

In 1985 a group of Biblical Scholars gathered to try to tease apart the pre-Easter Jesus from the post-Easter Jesus. This group, known as the Jesus Seminar, was active for 20+ years. Using all the tools and contemporary scholarship available to them to better understand the historical person named Jesus of Nazareth. Like my challenge of writing about St. Francis, they set out to try to separate the historical person from the person Jesus became after his death, in the hearts and minds of his followers.

The Jesus Seminar saw value in trying to get back to the person that those early followers found so compelling, to introduce him afresh to a new generation, without all the layers the church has added throughout history. Conservative Christians consider their work heresy. But for people disillusioned by what Christianity has become, their work has been life-giving and helps people to fall in love with Jesus in a way they can interpret him for our time.

So, who was the pre-Easter Jesus? Who was the historical person that we call Christ? What did people see in Jesus that led them to understand him as the decisive revelation of God?

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, "Speaking Christian," p. 88

Here is what we know with some certainty:

- Jesus was Jewish and grew up in Nazareth, in the Northern part of his homeland that was part of the Roman Empire. Nazareth was a peasant village.
- Jesus was a Jewish mystic, a deeply spiritual person who experienced God in profound ways. He was also gifted with wisdom and a student of the law, writings, and prophets which we know as the Old Testament.
- In his early adulthood, Jesus became a follower of John the Baptist and was baptized by him.
- After John was imprisoned, Jesus began his public ministry where he healed, cast out demons, taught, and attracted a following, speaking mostly to the peasant class.
- He taught using parables and aphorisms, many of which subverted conventional wisdom and the purity code so prevalent in his time.
- He was known for, and criticized for, his association with marginalized people often called "sinners and tax collectors" in the Bible.
- In a society where sharing a meal meant acceptance of those with whom one ate, Jesus was known for, and criticized for, eating with those deemed as outcasts.
- The "kingdom of God" was at the heart of Jesus' message as he invited people to imagine what life on earth would be like if God were king and the kings and emperors of the world were not: a world of justice and peace – meaning everyone has enough and the end of war.
- He taught non-violent resistance to violence and exploitation, challenging those he taught to work with God to change the way things are rather than waiting for God to make things right.
- In the season of Passover, he went to Jerusalem, taking his message to the traditional center of the Jewish people, but in his time, it was ruled by a high priest and aristocracy who collaborated with Rome.
- While in Jerusalem, he engaged in provocative acts of non-violent resistance, and not surprisingly, he was executed by crucifixion for challenging imperial authority.<sup>2</sup>

This is the pre-Easter Jesus. He didn't walk around calling himself the Son of God, Christ, Messiah, or Savior. He was fully human, and I would add, an extraordinary human.

And it is this Jesus of Nazareth, who came to known to his followers as the decisive revelation of the nature and passion of God. The God he reveals is a God of compassion who longs for the wholeness and healing of broken people and systems that break people. The God he reveals has concern for those at the margins, the oppressed and demonized. God's kingdom is one of peace and justice and Jesus called disciples to collaborate with God in transforming our hearts and our world.

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, "Speaking Christian," this is a summation from the chapter on Jesus

I saw a post on Facebook last week that really bothered me. The church this person once attended is now going through the Open and Affirming process. Now I don't know if this is what this person was responding to or not, but here it is:

**The idea that everyone is welcome in a church is pretty obvious. The idea that a church should change its moral standards in order to make everyone feel welcome is not and is paganistic.**

Numerous people "liked" this post. I wanted so much to comment, but I restrained myself. I wanted to write something like, "The church once thought slavery and segregation was moral. The church once thought the slaughter of heathens was moral." I found myself getting fired up. All you have to do is read church history to see how far from Jesus a church can become.

When Christianity becomes distorted and coopted by people who use it to dominate others and protect their privilege, as it has in history and like we are seeing right now, it has lost sight of the man who gave his life for the cause of love and compassion and justice.

This is why understanding the historical Jesus is so vitally important! He returns us to the heart of God. He returns us, again and again, to the way.

Christianity is in a rapid state of decline. What many are rejecting are the abuses of power they have seen in the church, the doctrines that have emerged over time, and a portrayal of Jesus with a halo around his head.

If only they knew Jesus, the extraordinary human, who exercised compassion, who challenged people to evaluate so-called morals that segregate, demonize, and oppress others, who non-violently resisted political and social pressure to give up on his program of love and justice, who was executed by the state for his subversive teaching. If only they knew the Jesus who came so all might have life and have it abundantly. If only they knew the Jesus who, even now, invites us to follow. If only they knew. I think they might find him very compelling.

So, who is going to tell them? Where will they go to see this Jesus, alive and well, in the hearts and minds of his followers?

Here I am, Lord, send me.  
Here we are, Lord, send us.

Amen.

