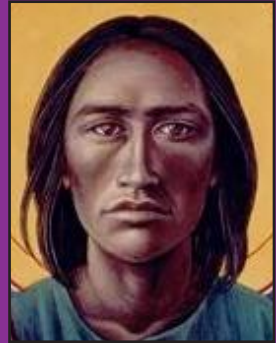
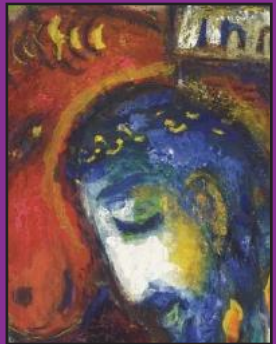
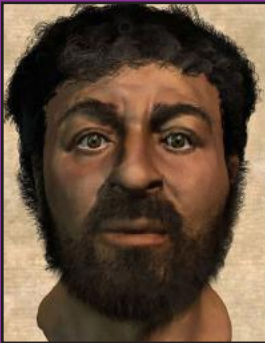


Lenten
Worship
And Study
Series:



Who
Do You
Say
That I
Am?



Who Do *You* Say That I Am?

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DISCOVERING THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF JESUS

DARREN CUSHMAN WOOD

**2024 Lenten Study
North United Methodist Church**

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INTRODUCTION

The December 2008 issue of “Popular Mechanics” featured its customized portrait of Jesus, just in time for the holidays. A group of Israeli and British forensic anthropologists had teamed up with computer programmers to create a rendering of what Jesus would have looked like based on historical demographics.

The portrait (which you can find online by searching “Popular Mechanics Jesus”) depicts an olive-skinned, slightly chubby, bearded man. They estimate that he stood 5’1” and weighed 110 pounds. But according to one of the researchers, “it would be hard to find a lot of evidence” on the actual Jesus.

“Popular Mechanics” stands in a very long line of artists, poets, and theologians who have crafted their portraits of Jesus. Jaroslav Pelikan’s classic, “Jesus Through the Centuries,” chronicles how Jesus has been depicted and conceptualized throughout the history of Western culture. He catalogued 18 different trends. That’s a lot of Jesuses!

The purpose of this study is to assist you in discovering Jesus for yourself. Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and through this study, he asks us the same question: “Who do *YOU* say that I am?” What is your understanding of the nature and mission of Jesus Christ that speaks to you and helps your faith deepen and expand into every area of your life?

It is more than an academic question. It engages every aspect of our lives—what you feel, what you do, and also what you think.

The answer is a matter of salvation, or as the theo-

logian Paul Tillich would say, a question of ultimate concern. The answer will give meaning and direction to your life that will change you and make you whole. In short, the purpose of this study is to give you a first-hand experience of Jesus.

To that end, each session follows a deliberate process. It begins on the emotional level with an exercise designed to assist you by “Discovering Jesus with Your Heart.” To fully experience Jesus one must act on this tentative, intuitive acquittance, and so the second step is put into practice the teaching and example of Jesus. This second step is a faith experiment in “Serving Jesus with Your Hands.” The last step is reflection on what you have felt and practiced by “Learning About Jesus with Your Heads.” From heart to hand to head, knowing Jesus is a total experience.

Before we begin, a word about titles for Jesus. The Bible is replete with titles, images, and metaphors for him: Redeemer, Holy One of Israel, Head of the Church, The Almighty, Alpha and Omega, Master, Immanuel, Advocate, Mediator, Chief Cornerstone, Pioneer and Perfecter of Our Faith, Lamb of God, The Shepherd and Bishop of Souls, Fountain of Living Waters, True Vine, Bridegroom, Dayspring, The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, The Bright and Morning Star, The Image of the Invisible God. So often titles for Jesus have multiple meanings:

- **Son of God (Son of the Most High)** — It can refer to his divine origins, his authority, and his supernatural power, but it also is the title mentioned at the crucifixion
- **Son of God** — This can also be translated “Human One,” and is often his self-designation. It sometimes refers to his human suffering but at other times it is linked with his second coming and authority to judge the world.
- **Christ** — This is not his last name! It is the Greek word for

the Hebrew “Messiah,” which simply means “the anointed one.”

• **Savior** — This is rarely used in the Gospels (only three times: Luke 1:47; 2:11; John 4:42). In the Roman Empire it was usually assigned to a great military leader or one who brought political liberation, but in the New Testament it takes on cosmic and spiritual dimensions.

Because of the fluidity of these biblical titles, I have chosen instead to organize this study with more contemporary titles that allow for the reader to contemplate the themes we encounter in Jesus.

I even struggled with whether to organize this study around “Jesus” or “Christ” as the primary nomenclature. For many, “Jesus” refers to the historical person, whereas “Christ” connotes his divine or spiritual significance. “Christ” is a title — the anointed one — and Jesus is a personal name; “Christ” describes what one believes is the nature and significance of Jesus. One could call him, “Jesus the Christ” (like “Jesus the Messiah”), or he is referred to as “Lord Jesus Christ” to signify one’s faith in him.

I believe it is essential to hold the two together, Jesus Christ or Jesus the Christ, because the title explains the theological significance of the historical character Jesus, and Jesus, the historical character, grounds the theological significance of the Christ in real-life stories and teachings.

Regardless of the title or imagery, here are four tips on how to think about Jesus:

1. Tradition helps us understand scripture. Traditional doctrines and creeds often have a negative reputation, especially among liberal Protestants. But the purpose of tradition is to give us guidance for sorting out the diverse and sometimes contradictory statements in the Bible or to help fill in

the gaps for understanding scripture.

We do the same thing with our contemporary experiences and human reason, and so tradition is the collective wisdom of previous generations gathered together for our use. Others have wrestled with the same questions we do, and we can learn from their insights for our contemporary problems.

When properly understood, the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are outlines, like a coloring book, that allows for diverse interpretations. For example, the creeds affirm that Jesus was crucified but they do not explain why or how his death saves us.

A belief such as the Trinity can help make sense of the contradictions and vagueness of scripture about Jesus's nature. As you study, keep scripture and tradition in conversation with each other and use tradition as one navigational tool, along with reason and experience, to guide you through scripture.

2. Understand the problem that Jesus solves. A popular slogan is, "Jesus is the Answer." If so, then what is the problem?

How you define the problem of the human condition sets up how you envision Jesus Christ as our salvation. The most common answer is to say that sin is the problem. But that begs the question, "What is sin?"

In scripture and tradition, there are a variety of ways to describe sin: disobedience, alienation, pride, oppression, etc. These different definitions of sin may be compatible, but the one that you focus on will shape how you understand what makes Jesus the solution.

3. Be aware of malfunctioning versions of Jesus. In his book "A Public Faith," Miroslav Volf describes different

ways Christians express their faith in public life that harms the common good. He calls these actions as “faith’s malfunctions.”

In the same way there have been expressions and depictions of Jesus that “malfunction;” they cause us harm because they legitimize abuse, oppression, and ill-health. We need to be aware of how Jesus can be misused to hurt others or ourselves, and then our religion covers over these problems.

4. Religious beliefs are like mobiles. Religious beliefs interact with one another, and the significance or insignificance we give to various beliefs affects the overall vision of our faith. They act like pieces in a mobile — a suspended sculpture whose parts are connected by wires and hooks that was pioneered by Alexander Calder.

In a mobile, the larger pieces impact the smaller ones and the placement of the pieces determines the overall shape of the mobile. Think of your view of Jesus like a mobile. There are many things you may believe about him: messiah, friend, crucified, incarnated, resurrected, etc. But one or two of those things will carry more weight than the others and thus will shape how we understand him and how those different aspects work together.

As you begin this study, you are not alone. Small groups will be offered for you to discuss your insights and share your questions. Each Sunday I will explore the selected theme for the week in the sermon and the liturgy. As we worship and work, pray and share together, Jesus will meet us this Lent.

Pastor Darren
Lent 2024

SESSION 1: JESUS THE FRIEND

Introducing Jesus the Friend

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” — Matthew 11:19

Of all the ways to think about Jesus that we will examine in this study, the most popular representation is Jesus the Friend. Even though “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” was written nearly 170 years ago, it continues to be one of the most popular hymns in America.

Twenty years ago Sarah Young wrote a daily devotion book, “Jesus Calling,” in which each day’s devotion is written as if Jesus was speaking directly to the reader as a friend. To date it has sold 45 million copies.

Thinking about Jesus as our friend begins with an assumption: God is a personal being and God, through (or in) Jesus, wants to have a personal relationship with us. For some people this is hard to swallow. God is, at best, an impersonal life force. For others, Jesus the Friend makes God personal to them. This paradox of God being both intimate and vast will be seen throughout this study.

For this session we will explore the different dimensions of what it means to see Jesus as our friend. It is an image of comfort and assurance. It is a vision of understanding and compassion. Many people are drawn to it because of the hardships they have endured, and the image of Jesus as their friend gives them meaning and support in the worst of times.

Allusions to Jesus the Friend are seen in his interactions with people throughout the Gospels. Matthew describes Jesus as having compassion for the crowds when he saw how troubled and helpless they were (Matthew 9:36). In many of the healing stories, Jesus is moved to compassion when he sees the struggles of parents and caregivers. He is moved to tears by the death of his friend Lazarus in John 11. His gentleness is seen in his acceptance of children (Luke 18:15-17). Near the end of his life, he said to his disciples, "I don't call you servants any longer....I call you friends" (John 15:15, CEB).

In the Gospels the portrayal of Jesus as a friend is rather shocking. He is criticized for being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners," and he frequents dinner parties with social outcasts. Jesus the Friend includes a socially subversive element because his friendships violate social norms of decency and respectability. If the image of Jesus the Friend has any relevance for us today it challenges us to extend our unconditional friendship to those who have been rejected and criticized by the church and society.

Friendship with the Savior addresses our alienation from God. One of the many ways to understand sin is that it is our separation from God. The alienation produces anxiety. In Jesus, God draws near to us with a reassuring presence.

To be sure, Jesus the Friend has its critics for good reason. The idea of Jesus as one's "personal Lord and Savior" can spawn a privatized spirituality and truncates God to a personal deity. It is all too easy to make Jesus the Friend fit into our consumer culture in which even spirituality becomes a commodity for us to consume.

If Christianity is nothing more than a personal relationship with Jesus, then Christians are free to ignore the suf-

fering caused by systemic evil. If all we have is Jesus our buddy then we fail to hear the fuller dimensions of his story and we ignore his challenging words that confront social injustice.

Jesus is your friend, but sometimes he is the friend that gets on your nerves.

And yet, could it be that in an age of increasing isolation and loneliness that Jesus the Friend is still relevant? Could it be that in a culture of criticism that Jesus the Friend symbolizes God's unconditional acceptance, and when combined with other conceptions of Christ, we find ourselves in a relationship with Jesus that truly transforms all our relationships?

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Friend with Our Hearts

Throughout this week, pause and remember the words of Jesus from Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

As you repeat them, become aware of his presence. He is speaking these words to you, through the Bible, right now. Imagine him inviting you to take a break and encouraging you to sit down with him. Imagine him as a friend sitting with you who is willing to listen to your struggles and give you the comfort you need.

Step Two: Serving Jesus The Friend With Our Hands

This week, reach out to someone you do not know very well and spend some time with them. Maybe you will have lunch with a co-worker, spend some extra time talking with a neighbor, or call an old friend or relative you have not seen in a long time. It may be a church member whom you

have not seen in a long while. Practice Jesus's example of unconditional acceptance and hospitality in some small way with those you meet.

Step Three: Learning about Jesus The Friend With Our Heads

How have you experienced Jesus the Friend this week? What insights and questions did this stir in you?

Read Luke 5:27-32. Jesus befriends the socially unacceptable tax collector Levi and his friends. Who would Jesus hang out with today? Jesus' response to his critics was to compare himself to a doctor who tends to the sick. How is friendship healing?

Read Hebrews 4:14-16. Hebrews describes Jesus with what is probably the opposite image of a friend: a high priest. How is Jesus a different kind of priest, and how does that help us?

Read John 15:9-17. How is friendship depicted in what Jesus says to his disciples?

Further Reading

“Jesus Calling” by Sarah Young

SESSION 2: JESUS THE REVOLUTIONARY

Introducing Jesus the Revolutionary

“Jesus said to them, “Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households.” — Mark 6:4 (CEB)

Last week’s session introduced us to the affable, friendly Jesus. This week we see the other side of the picture: Jesus turns over tables and chases money-changers out of the Temple, argues with religious leaders, inspires the masses, and upsets the religious norms and customs of his hometown. If Jesus is our friend, then it’s a high-maintenance friendship. He is a prophet, a troublemaker, a provocateur who regularly engages in street theater and public debates. Let me introduce you to Jesus the Revolutionary.

If the word revolution means the overthrowing of a social order in favor of a new system, then Jesus could be considered a revolutionary (or at the very least, a reformer). History can be the judge of how successful his revolution has been.

Regardless, his teachings were revolutionary. They center on “the Realm of God” (Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven). Indeed, his central focus is not on himself but on proclaiming that God’s reign is at hand (Mark 1:15). By this, he meant that God was inaugurating through his ministry a new era in which God’s big picture of salvation will com-

mence for all people, all of creation, and for all time. The features of God’s Reign are teased out in parables designed to stir up the imagination with God’s hope — and stir up trouble for the status quo.

What makes his teachings revolutionary is the way they challenge conventional thinking, both religious and political. He envisions a reversal of power dynamics between rich and poor. He envisions non-violent ways to respond to injustice. The religious leaders are called out for being hypocrites. All this is an extension of the radical vision of justice espoused by the Hebrew prophets.

He put his words into action. His counter-cultural vision for human relationships is exemplified with food. He eats with sinners and tax collectors, and he teaches an alternative way to host a party by honoring folks who are not of high social standing. His revolutionary views are on display when he violates religious regulations by healing on the Sabbath, and his healings often change relationships in a small town by allowing outcasts to reenter society. His interactions with women are revolutionary. He accepts and honors them as examples of faith for all to follow.

Titles for Jesus imply his radical identity with an ironic twist. “Savior” was a term used for great military leaders who brought deliverance for a besieged city, for example. Christ (or in Hebrew, Messiah) means “anointed one” and carried an ironic connotation that a backwoods prophet, rather than a king, would be the Christ. Even the title “Lord” could be read in some passages as an indirect rebuttal of Caesar.

Even his death implies a revolutionary identity. Only enemies of the Roman Empire were crucified, and the charges against him were both religious (blasphemy) and po-

litical (claiming to be a king). By the world's standards of power and success he is an incompetent revolutionary. But he was leading a different kind of revolution.

If Jesus is God's revolutionary, then he is sent to solve two problems. Jesus the Revolutionary challenges social injustices caused by hatred, greed, and the abuse of power. But he also challenges the apathy of his potential followers to follow his example and teachings even when the rest of the world is against them.

Calling him God's revolutionary leader has obvious pitfalls. Some scholars dispute the radicality of his teachings and say it is inaccurate to call him a revolutionary. Also, history has seen political revolutions and social movements use Jesus as a symbol for their cause. It could be a case of reading too much of our agenda into the scriptures. The Gospel is manipulated by an ideology. The spiritual dimensions of his teachings are ignored or misunderstood. If Jesus is on our side, then it becomes very easy to demonize anyone who does not agree with our views.

Still, in a world wounded by social injustice, could it be that we need to meet this irascible character? At a time when it is very tempting to become numb to the immense and complex challenges of the world, maybe we need to pay attention to the challenging message of Jesus the Revolutionary.

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Revolutionary with Our Hearts

Each day this week, pray for the needs of the world using Jesus's vision of hope as your prayer prompt. When Jesus visited his hometown synagogue he read from the prophet Isaiah and launched his public ministry with this as his

touchstone passage:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)”

Use this passage as the outline for your daily intercessory prayers. Ask for the Spirit of the Lord to be in your heart. Then, let each line prompt you to pray for persons who today are in similar situations, both literally and metaphorically.

Step Two: Serving Jesus the Revolutionary with Our Hands

This week make a commitment to support an organization that is addressing a social issue for which you feel passionate. Your support may be financial or voluntary; it may be hands-on work or advocacy through social media. Learn more about what they are doing to promote and reflect Jesus’ vision of social reform.

For ideas and information about the official social teachings of The United Methodist Church, read “The Social Principles” (www.umc.org/en/who-we-are/what-we-believe/our-social-positions).

Step Three: Learning About Jesus the Revolutionary with Our Heads

How have you experienced Jesus the Revolutionary this week? What insights and questions did this stir in you?

Read Matthew 5:38-47; 21:12-17; Mark 4:30-32; 8:1-9; 10:13-16; Luke 6:20-26; 10:25-37, and John 8:1-11. Summarize Jesus' vision for a new world. How does Jesus propose we live into his vision? How realistic are his commands for us today? How should we deal with the seemingly "unrealistic" aspects of his ethical advice?

Read Matthew 23:1-39. Jesus criticized the powerful of this day. What might Jesus say about the organizations and leaders who have power today? What might he say to American churches at this moment in history?

Further Reading

"Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography" by John Dominic Crossan

SESSION 3: JESUS THE SAGE

Introducing Jesus the Sage

“Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

— Matthew 11:19

The image of Jesus as a wise teacher or sage may be the most popular rendition of him among non-Christians. It is compatible with many other religions, and many of his sayings are similar to the ideas of other great teachers. In this session we examine the relevance of Jesus the Sage for our lives today.

To understand Jesus the Sage we begin with the conception of wisdom in the Old Testament. Wisdom is an attribute of God that gives life and prosperity to those who obey God. Thus, there is an essential link between wisdom and obedience to God which is summarized in the saying, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 9:10)” Wisdom was there when God created the world and provides a life-giving order to the cosmos.

In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman (from which comes the image of God as “Sophia” (from the Greek word for wisdom and from the Hebrew word for wisdom, “hakma,” which is a feminine noun). The identification of Jesus with wisdom is part of the feminine side of Jesus given the feminine personification of wisdom in the Old Testament.

The first three Gospels portray Jesus as a teacher of divine wisdom. Like other sages, he gathers students (dis-

ciples) around him and teaches as they travel together. He teaches in the style of the wisdom tradition by using parables, aphorism, maxims, and beatitudes to explain the Kingdom of God. For example, the Sermon on the Mount has several wisdom features throughout it (Matthew 5-7).

The Gospel of John goes a step further and portrays Jesus as the personification of God's wisdom. For example, the first chapter shares significant similarities with Proverbs 8 and passages from the Wisdom of Solomon (a book in the Apocrypha).

John reflects the early church's association of Jesus with divine wisdom. Paul equates the cross with the wisdom of God in his first letter to the Corinthians. Colossians describes Christ in ways that echo older Jewish wisdom writings, including Proverbs 8: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created. . . .and in him all things hold together. (1:15-17)" The early church venerated Jesus as the embodiment of God's wisdom.

Jesus the Sage answers problems we still face today. Then and now, we can be confused about which path is the right way to go in life. We need wisdom for guidance. Self-deception and lies are always a byproduct of sin needing the clarity of wisdom to show us the truth.

The image of Jesus the Sage has its potential shortcomings. On the one hand, it is very easy to water-down the teachings of Jesus and make them mere reflections of common sense and conventional wisdom. But when we do this we are picking and choosing the sayings that more easily fit our lifestyle and ignoring the ones that rub us the wrong way.

On the other hand, they can be hard to understand and put into practice. Jesus the Sage makes us wonder whether

his teaching is applicable today. For example, the commands in the Sermon on the Mount are truly stark, and throughout the centuries believers have wrestled with how, on practical terms, they can be followed.

Yet, in a world filled with mixed messages, do we not need the clarity of God's wisdom? Couldn't we all use a sage like Jesus to show us the way?

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Sage with Our Hearts

This week's spiritual exercise is known as "Palms Down, Palms Up." The goal is to center oneself in the presence of God so that you are ready to receive God's wisdom.

Step 1: Remove as many distractions as possible. Take several slow, deep breaths.

Step 2: Hold your hands palms down and envision giving all your burdens to God. Imagine these things falling out of your hands.

Step 3: When you can imagine your hands empty, turn your hands palms up and think about what you need from God. Imagine God putting those things in your hands.

Step 4: Close by saying, "So be it. Amen."

Step Two: Serving Jesus the Sage with Our Hands

Live out the wisdom of Christ this week by conveying affirmation and appreciation to someone who needs to hear it. Give a coworker, a neighbor, or a relative a special word of affirmation. Send a letter thanking someone for how they have made a positive impact on your life. Let someone who has passed on their wisdom to you know how much it meant to you.

Step Three: Learning about Jesus the Sage with Our Heads

How have you experienced Jesus the Sage this week? What insights and questions did this stir in you?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. According to Paul, how is God's wisdom as expressed in Jesus different from what society sees as wisdom? What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge? What is the relationship between the two?

Read Matthew 7:24-29. What are the differences between the wise and the foolish man in Jesus's story? What are the principles and values on which you have built your life?

What wisdom was Jesus passing on to the disciples in the following parables:

- Mark 4:26-29
- Matthew 13:45-46
- Luke 16:1-13

Why do you think he shared God's wisdom through parables?

Which saying or teaching of Jesus' is the most important to you? Why?

If you could go back in time and talk to your younger self, what is one piece of advice you would give yourself?

Further Reading

“Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus” by Bernard Brandon Scott

SESSION 4: JESUS THE SOVEREIGN

Introducing Jesus the Sovereign

“Then Jesus came to them and said,
‘All authority in heaven and on earth
has been given to me.’”
— Matthew 28:18

One of the earliest confessions of faith is the simplest: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” It is the affirmation of his divine authority and sovereign power. Traditionally it was symbolized by Jesus wearing a crown or holding an orb.

The last Sunday of the Church year is Christ the King Sunday.

In this session, we will explore what it means to believe in Jesus the Sovereign.

Various New Testament titles for Jesus convey his divine sovereignty. In addition to Lord, the title Christ (in Hebrew, Messiah) means “the anointed one” whom God has endowed with authority. Son of God implies a divine authority just as Son of David illuminates a royal, human lineage. On one occasion Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man when he claimed authority to forgive sins, and one of the many dimensions of the Son of Man will be the divine judge at the end of time.

The Gospel story repeatedly highlights his authority and the controversy it created. He teaches “as one who has authority (Matthew 7:29).” His miracles demonstrated his authority over the forces of nature (such as, calming the sea

storm) and supernatural forces (casting out demons). His opponents questioned his authority to reinterpret the law, and Pilate scrutinized his divine authority. His resurrection exemplifies the vindication of his divine authority over the forces of death.

The early church celebrated his sovereignty. One of the earliest hymns is recorded in Philippians 2 and it culminates with praise for Jesus the Sovereign:

“Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 9-11)”

The Book of Revelation envisions Jesus as the Lamb of God who is seated on (or sometimes by) the throne of God.

Jesus the Sovereign takes on the sin of pride and human rebellion against God. All human authorities become relative in light of the believer’s unconditional allegiance to Christ.

For example, the sole sovereignty of Jesus Christ was the cornerstone to the Confessing Church’s opposition to Hitler, which was expressed in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “The Cost of Discipleship” that was written to train pastors to resist the Third Reich.

In addition to the challenge that his lordship poses, Jesus the Sovereign is also a comforting image. For those who trust in him, his ability to control the course of history

is reassuring.

As with other portrayals of Christ, Jesus the Sovereign has been misused. Throughout history kings equated their authority with the power of Christ. The symbols of religion have been often used to legitimize coercion by governments and the expansion of empires. Also, depending on how the lordship of Christ is conceptualized, it can justify the condemnation of other religions and cultures.

If properly understood, faith in Jesus the Sovereign can liberate us from the corrupting influences of society. Could it be that a world bent on evil needs to be governed by this kind of ruler? Could it be that our assurance is found not in our ability to govern ourselves but in our trust of the One who governs the cosmos?

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Sovereign with Our Hearts

The practice of a daily examen (“examination”) comes from the Ignatian tradition (Jesuits) in Roman Catholicism. An examen is a series of reflection questions and prayers normally done at the close of the day. There are a variety of examens; some are quiet elaborate. This version comes from United Methodist Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher:

Step 1: Give God thanks for the day and for God’s presence.

Step 2: Reflect on these questions:

- Where did I notice the presence of God today?
- What do I need to confess?
- Whom do I need to forgive?
- For what do I give thanks?
- What has God taught me today?

Step 3: Name the day.

Step 4: Identify the gift(s) needed for tomorrow.

Step 5: Offer your life back to Christ. Let go of all troubling thoughts and concerns about the day.

Step Two: Serving Jesus the Sovereign with Our Hands

This week, honor Jesus as your Lord by following his example of service for others. He described himself as a servant: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)”

Serve others this week with hands-on acts of kindness and compassion. It may be informal and impromptu service for another individual, or it may be done as part of one of the many ministries of the church. Submit your time and talents to Christ and let him use them as instruments of his love for others.

Step Three: Learning about Jesus the Sovereign with Our Heads

Read Matthew 8:19-20. What did Jesus say to the scribe (an expert in Jewish law) who offered to be his disciple? How does following Christ present challenges for us today?

Read Matthew 8:21-22. What was the point Jesus was making when he did not allow this person to bury his father before joining the disciples? In what ways does our past get in the way of following Jesus into the future?

Read Matthew 8:23-27. What scares you? What would it mean to trust Jesus with what scares you?

Read Philippians 2:5-13. How is the authority and power of Jesus depicted in this ancient hymn? What does it mean for us to be “of the same mind as Christ Jesus” based on this depiction of him?

What would it mean for Christ to be fully in charge of the following areas of your life:

- Finances
- Family
- Friends
- Career
- Retirement
- Rest
- Health

Further Reading

“The Cost of Discipleship” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

SESSION 5: JESUS THE REPRESENTATIVE

Introducing Jesus the Representative

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory,
the glory as of a father’s only son,
full of grace and truth.”
— John 1:14

The previous sessions have focused on the teachings and stories of Jesus. They lead us to ask deeper questions about his identity. This deeper dive begins with the Incarnation.

The Incarnation is a doctrine that claims that Jesus is fully divine and fully human (God in the flesh=incarnate). It is not about how Mary got pregnant. Rather, it is about the paradox of his identity, and at the heart of his identity is representation. Jesus represents God to us, a divine revelation of the nature of God in his life. And he represents us to God by standing in solidarity with the human struggle. In this session we will unpack the meaning of Jesus the Representative.

At this point in our exploration it would seem logical to switch the terms we are using from “Jesus,” the historical character, to “Christ,” the divine person. But the Incarnation pushed the point that it is precisely in this human, this historical character, that God’s identity is represented. He was certainly not the first person at that time in history to be con-

sidered divine, but what makes the Incarnation so unusual is that Christians believe this Galilean who is crucified is the Incarnate One.

It is a strange way to represent God. One cannot talk about the doctrine of the Incarnation without taking seriously the details of historical research uncovered in studies of Jesus as a revolutionary and a sage.

Jesus represents God to us. In Matthew he is called Emmanuel, God with us (1:23). The Incarnation is God making God's self accessible to us, communicating in a way that we can relate to and understand.

One can also say that the Incarnation is God for us. God becomes human to create a way for our humanity to be endowed with divine presence.

In writing about the Incarnation, the fourth century theologian Athanasius said it this way: "God became human so that humans could become God."

And so the Incarnation is the basis for the Eastern Orthodox belief that through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives we become "partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)."

This is akin to the Methodist understanding of sanctification (holiness). According to this view of salvation, the Incarnation is Jesus representing God, who is actively reclaiming from sin all the dimensions of the human experience in the life (and death) of Jesus. At the same time Jesus is representing humankind being restored to our original divine image (Genesis 1:27).

What shapes how one understands the Incarnation is how one defines the problem it is meant to solve. If the problem is emptiness, the human need for complete spiritual fulfillment, then Jesus the (double) Representative kickstarts

this spiritual process. If the problem in life is the lack of moral direction, then Jesus as a great moral teacher may suffice.

The history of the idea of the Incarnation goes in two seemingly contradictory directions. On the one hand it has been interpreted to justify the exclusivity of Christianity. Jesus Christ is the one and only God-Man who alone brings salvation to humanity. This view of Jesus is the core conflict between liberal Protestants and evangelicals. Or, as the title of one popular book claims, Jesus is “More Than a Carpenter.”

On the other hand the Incarnation has been interpreted to be the foundational idea for Christian inclusivity.

According to this view, the Incarnation of Christ is a sign of the presence of God in all of life, including other religions. This is often called “panentheism” — God is found in and through all creation and creation exists within the reality of God (in contrast to “pantheism,” which equates God and creation). It is foundational for certain forms of Christian mysticism. This view is promoted by the Catholic contemporary writer Richard Rohr in his book, “The Universal Christ.”

If we think of the Incarnation as a paradox, then we can see how an imbalance of Christ’s divine and human natures highlights these two differences. If one overemphasizes the divine nature it can create a domineering and unrelatable portrait of Christ. If one overemphasizes the human nature then Jesus remains a remote historical figure. If his Incarnation is so unique, then it has no relevance for us today. But if his Incarnation is everything and everywhere, then it is little more than a bland truism.

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Representative with Our Hearts

This week, spend time in prayer as you walk or engage in manual tasks. Be attentive to the presence of Christ in all of life. With the eyes of your heart, look for ordinary expressions of Christ’s love and hope in creation and those around you. Keep a daily log of what you notice. At the end of the week reflect on these little moments of the Incarnation.

Step Two: Serving Jesus the Representative with Our Hands

This week, honor the Incarnate Christ by caring for creation. Whether it is planting seeds, picking up trash, or providing food to an animal shelter, find a way to express our faith in Christ who “holds all creation together (Colossians 1:17).” NLT

Step Three: Learning about Jesus the Representative with Our Heads

What is your favorite Christmas carol? What does it tell you about the Incarnation?

Read Matthew 1:18-25. Joseph was surprised and perplexed by the angel’s announcement. How is the idea of Emmanuel — God with us — surprising and perplexing?

Read John 1:1-14. How does John’s Gospel describe “the Word?” How does faith in Jesus connect us to creation?

What difference would it make in your life for God to be “incarnated” in you?

What does it mean to see the face of Christ in others?

Further Reading

“The Universal Christ” by Richard Rohr

SESSION 6: JESUS THE CONDEMNED

Introducing Jesus the Condemned

“Now when the centurion, who stood facing him,
saw that in this way he breathed his last,
he said, ‘Truly this man was God’s son!’”
— Mark 15:39 (NRSV)

As we make our way to Easter Sunday we cannot avoid Good Friday. On Calvary we meet Jesus the Condemned on the cross. For some this is the most comforting image of Christ, but for others it’s the most disturbing. In this session we contemplate the many different sides of the cross and how Jesus the Condemned speaks to us today.

We begin by examining the historical side of the cross. Jesus was condemned by a Roman governor, Pilate, in collusion with the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish leaders who controlled the Temple. In short, he was killed by the Roman Empire as part of an act of torture. This sounds rather basic, but there is a long history of misplaced accusations that “the Jews” killed Jesus which has inspired horrible atrocities against the Jewish people. Any interpretation of the crucifixion that inspires or rationalizes injustice is a wrong interpretation because it violates our fundamental belief in a just and loving God.

The event raises questions about its significance for our faith. Why did Jesus die? Scripture and tradition claim that it has significance for our salvation, but how? The Apostles’ Creed affirms that he “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was

crucified, died, and was buried,” and the Nicene Creed even adds that he did this “for our sake.” But the creeds never explain how the cross works in the process of God’s redemption.

This gap in the explanation has allowed believers over the centuries to craft a variety of explanations, leaving us with diverse opinions. Many of the explanations are not necessarily at odds with each other but can even be combined. Here is the spectrum of options for explaining how Jesus the Condemned is our Savior:

- The cross was the inevitable consequence of his ministry. It is not that there is something about the cross that saves, but rather it is part of a bigger story and greater message. What saves us is his teaching and example.
- The cross is the supreme example of God’s love for us that inspires us to trust in God.
- On the cross, Jesus bore the sins of the world. Jesus took our place so that we are not punished for our sins. Or, Jesus satisfied God’s requirement for humans to restore their honor for God.
- On the cross, Jesus destroyed the power of sin and evil. The crucifixion and resurrection are a one-two punch that knocks out death and the forces of destruction.

Each explanation offers insights and each has deficiencies. Each has its own scripture passages to support it. Regardless of the specific explanation, the image of the crucified Christ has malfunctioned in one of two ways throughout history.

One, it has been used to excuse abuse, as mentioned above. It is very easy to see the crucifixion as divine child abuse — the Father offers the Son as a sacrifice; the good Son dies to appease the angry Father.

Two, the crucifixion has fostered a passive resignation to evil in the world. According to this logic, if Jesus's death was the all-sufficient sacrifice, then we don't (can't) need to do anything to eliminate social problems.

These two malfunctions have led some theologians to dismiss that cross altogether and to assert that there is nothing salvific in the image of Jesus the Condemned. The problem with this criticism is that there is too much in scripture supporting its role in redemption. While the scriptures do not offer a "theory of atonement," the cross is described as playing a pivotal role in God's plan of salvation. One cannot ignore the passages that say Jesus died "for us" (even though we may struggle to understand this and have different ways to explain it; see Romans 5:8).

Regardless of where you land on these issues, there are two other doctrines that help us understand the significance of Jesus the Condemned. The crucifixion needs to be understood in light of the Incarnation. If the Incarnation is the revelation of Emmanuel, then the crucifixion is God with us in our worst moments. The Crucified God does not abandon us to suffer alone, but is with us and leads us out of death.

For example, James Cone explores this from the perspective of Black history in "The Cross and the Lynching Tree." The crucifixion as the culmination of the Incarnation.

Also, it is crucial to understand the crucifixion in light of the Trinity. A fundamental aspect of the Trinity is the oneness of God — the three so-called "persons" are not three separate entities, nor is one superior to the other two. And so, what we see on the cross is a revelation; it reveals a "crucified God." How very strange! At the very least, one cannot claim that the cross is divine child abuse because it is God who is suffering on the cross incarnated in Jesus the Christ. Very

strange, indeed!

Could it be that we need to experience this Crucified God as part of our process of being saved from the self-destructive effects of sin and from the destructive effects of evil?

Could it be that we can only look at the broken parts of our lives through the image of Jesus the Condemned so that we are not overwhelmed by guilt and shame?

Could it be that we need to know a Messiah who goes the distance with us, down into the worst moments of our lives, so that he can bring us out of it and make us whole?

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Condemned with Our Hearts

One day this week, spend time meditating on the cross. All religions include the practice of meditation. The word “meditation” comes from the Greek *melete* which means “study,” “care,” or “exercise,” and denotes a disciplined exercise that fosters listening to and intimacy with God.

Step 1: Choose a time of day that allows for at least 10 minutes with no distractions.

Step 2: Choose a cross or a picture of the cross or crucifixion.

Step 3: As you begin, sit in a comfortable position.

Step 4: Remove all mental distractions and focus on your thoughts by slowing your breathing into a rhythm.

Step 5: For the first few minutes, use a mantra (a sacred word or phrase) to help you focus. Use one thing said at Calvary as a mantra:

- “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews (Matthew 27:37).”
- “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Mark 15:34)”

- “Truly this man was God’s Son (Mark 5:39).”
- “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34).”
- “Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom (Luke 42).”
- “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Luke 46).”
- “He said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and then to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ (John 19:26-27).”
- “It is finished (John 19:30).”

Step 6: Focus on the object or image of the cross. What is God revealing to you through it? What is God saying to you out of the silence?

Step 7: As you end your meditation, sit quietly and take time to refocus on your surroundings. You may want to close with a prayer, such as the Lord’s Prayer.

Step Two: Serving Jesus the Condemned with Our Hands

Do nothing. There is nothing you should do this week to express your faith in Jesus the Condemned. Do nothing to express your affirmation that his death is an expression of the unearnable and unconditional grace of God, the free gift of love we have in Christ Jesus.

Step Three: Learning about Jesus the Condemned with Our Head

Read Matthew 27:11-56. What is your overall impression of Jesus?

How did Jesus suffer emotionally?

What do you think motivated Pilate? The chief priests and teachers of the law? The guards?

Imagine you are one of the women watching all this. How would you have felt?

Why does the centurion say, “Surely this is God’s son” when he sees Jesus die?

Read Romans 5:6-11. What is the problem(s) the death of Christ solves?

How is the cross a demonstration of God’s love?

If the crucifixion is the culmination of the Incarnation, then what does Jesus’s suffering and death reveal about his identity as Emmanuel — God is with us?

Who is being “crucified” today, and how might Jesus the Condemned bring them comfort and hope?

Further Reading

“The Cross and the Lynching Tree” by James Cone

For a fuller exploration of the different meanings of the cross, read “Reclaiming the Cross: A Study of the Meanings of the Crucifixion” (available at Publications | North United Methodist Church (northchurchindy.com)).

SESSION 7: JESUS THE VICTOR

Introducing Jesus the Victor

“Now I would remind you,
brothers and sisters,
of the good news that I proclaimed to you
which you in turn received,
in which also you stand...
that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day
in accordance with the scriptures.”
— 1 Corinthians 15:1,4

This quote from First Corinthians is one of the earliest affirmations of faith. At the heart of it is the belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, Christianity would not have emerged out of Judaism if the first generation of disciples had not believed that Jesus was raised from the dead. For them, the resurrection was God’s victory over death that began with Jesus, and it will one day include all believers. And so, Easter is the celebration of Jesus the Victor.

The resurrection plays a central role in Paul’s letters. In Romans the risen Christ is the source of new life for believers. He describes Jesus’s death and resurrection as the process by which we die to the old self of sin and come “alive to God in Christ Jesus (6.11).” In First Corinthians, the risen Christ is the “first fruits of those who have died” that will generate a universal resurrection at the end of time (15:20).

In other places in the New Testament the resurrection

is a sign of God's power and authority. The Book of Acts emphasizes that God vindicated Jesus from his opponents by raising him from the dead (3:14-15; 4:10-11). In First Peter, the resurrected Jesus shares in the glory of God (1:21). In the book of Revelation, the risen Christ will overcome the forces of evil one last time.

The accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels are a composite of two traditions. There were empty tomb stories and there were collections of stories about the risen Jesus' appearances to the disciples. As the Gospels were edited and took their final form these two types of stories were combined.

In the modern era there has been an ongoing debate about what exactly happened that first Easter. Was Jesus' physical body raised from the dead, or was it a rise of faith in the believers? How literal should we take the Gospel stories?

On the one hand, liberal Protestant theologians have argued that it should not nor need not be taken literally.

On the other hand, conservative theologians have offered elaborate arguments for the necessity of a bodily resurrection.

Both sides of the debate have been driven by the problem of unbelief. The former argue for a non-literal reading to make the resurrection understandable within the limits of human reason, and the latter use rational arguments to prove the opposite.

For Liberation Theology, these arguments miss the point. The problem is not unbelief but oppression. A resurrected body lends support for the fight against the domination of evil because it aptly symbolizes victory over the forces of evil that kill bodies — poverty, political oppression, torture,

hunger, etc.

At the very least the debate over the “historical” nature of the resurrection can never be proven because it is a matter of faith. If you can prove that Jesus was raised from the dead using historical evidence then it is no longer a matter of faith. Even belief in a bodily resurrection is a statement of faith.

In a world where bodies and souls are being destroyed by sin and evil, we need a victorious Christ. Isn't this the reason to celebrate this Easter?

Step One: Discovering Jesus the Victor with Our Hearts

Let your Easter Sunday celebration become an Easter week of rejoicing. Every day following Easter, start the day with a prayer of praise for the risen Christ. Then, at noon or in the afternoon, pause and say a second prayer of rejoicing for the hope and new life of the resurrection we receive from Christ. Finally, at the end of the day close with an Easter hymn or one of these biblical songs of praise:

- Psalm 136
- Psalm 98
- Psalm 118
- Philippians 2:5-11
- Colossians 1:15-20
- Revelation 19:5-8

Step Two: Serving Jesus The Victor With Our Hands

The risen Christ is not only the source of our new and eternal hope, but he is also the source of our joy. This week, as an expression of your devotion to Jesus the Victor, bring joy into someone's life. Make them laugh, treat them to something they enjoy, or give them some accolades. Make it

your goal this week to put a smile on someone's face, and give them a reason to see the goodness of living.

Step Three: Learning about Jesus the Victor with Our Heads

Read Mark 16:1-8. What is the symbolic significance of the resurrection taking place at sunrise on the first day of the week (v. 2)?

Why does the risen Christ wait to appear to the disciples in Galilee rather than at the tomb?

What is our "Galilee" today, and what might it mean for the risen Christ to appear to us?

Why were they scared? What fears do we have, and how does Jesus the Victor help us with them?

Read the other three Gospel accounts of the resurrection: Matthew 28:1-20; Luke 24:1-49, and John 20:1-23. Compare and contrast the four Gospel accounts. How would you summarize in one sentence the main theme each makes about the resurrection?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:51-58. This is traditionally read at the committal service for the dead. How is Jesus's resurrection a victory for us — in this life, throughout society, and for the afterlife?

Further Reading

"Surprised by Hope" by N.T. Wright

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