

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16  
Psalm 22:22-30  
Romans 4:13-25  
Mark 8:31-38

Jonathan Thomas, Seminarian  
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Who is Jesus? How would we describe him to someone else? How do we explain him to ourselves? He is my Savior, he is the Son of God, he was a prophet, he was a Jew from ancient Palestine. This is a question we all wrestle with at some level. We must decide what he means to us.

Many of you, I am sure, are familiar with the Jesus Seminar, an endeavor by a group of great modern scholars in the fields of New Testament and early Christianity who are on a quest for the historical Jesus, by which they mean Jesus of Nazareth as we would have known him if we were there, rather than reading back through centuries of people's accounts and perceptions of him. These scholars meet together, read the gospels, as well as some extra-biblical literature and histories, and vote, with small colored marbles, concerning which sayings they think are more authentic to the real Jesus of history – black marble for definitely not Jesus, red marble for verifiably authentic, and pink for a distinct maybe. Now, the eccentric voting method aside, these people are no academic hacks or religious crazies, they are serious scholars in the field of the history of Christianity, among them John Dominic Crossan, Richard Funk, and Marcus Borg, attempting to be faithful and provide a real service to the greater Christian community. They are searching for the true ground upon which to build their faith, the Jesus at the historical center and foundation of the Christian religion.

The most interesting thing about this endeavor to me though, is the great lack of consistency and agreement about who the real Jesus actually is. Crossan argues that Jesus is a great morality teacher, while Funk believes he is the revered miracle worker. Borg prefers to articulate his Jesus as the apocalyptic prophet, while Richard Horsley is adamant that the true Jesus is the one who opposed, undermined, and subverted the Roman Empire at every turn. Four great scholars read the same scriptures and sources and find four different Christ figures on which to base their faith.

I think this is interesting because it is all there; all four versions are clearly attested to in our Holy Scriptures. In the beatitudes Jesus taught a whole new moral system, while everywhere it seems we find him healing the sick and forgiving sins, or prophesying about the last days and the coming kingdom, and the Jesus on the cross is the one crucified for being an insurrectionist, the king of the Jews who might upset Roman rule. But each of these articulations is attempting to reduce the complex, and multifaceted Jesus of the Gospel to a univocal, one-dimensional character. I suspect that each scholar has found the Jesus he was looking for. I suspect that because that is the Jesus we all tend to find when we read the gospel. Or in the words of Albert Schweitzer, we “peered down the long well of history and in the water, we see our own reflection.”

There is nothing particularly new or modern about this dilemma. It is often what we do in regards to religion in general – control and set parameters around the divine. We come up with a system in which we can reliably meet God, the God that we want to meet, and he can respond to us in an expected way, without having to be shaken too much from our normal lives. However, the scriptures, and particularly the story of the gospel, are the shattering of these neat expectations and conventional forms. They are new. That is why when we read the scriptures in our service we say “hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people” not what the Spirit has said,

but what he speaks today in this moment to shake us from our complacency. In today's New Testament passage Paul is telling the new Christians that they have been reading the covenant wrong all along, seeing in it what they wanted to see, what was comfortable and familiar, but he is shaking the very foundations of how they thought about their tradition and their relationship to it, and to God. They thought it was a predictable system, but he says no, it is radically new and different from anything you thought, anything you could have thought, and thus it requires a living faith, and not a set knowledge. This covenant requires you to grow and change in your relationship to the living God.

Further enforcing this religious truth is our gospel passage. At the center of this difficult and disturbing text is Jesus' stern rebuke of Peter's profound misunderstanding who Jesus was and what that required. Now I do not want to paint Peter in an unfair light, he too often is misunderstood himself, and maligned unjustly as Peter the denier who just doesn't get it. But remember he is also the one who abandons all and races to Jesus, who sees clearly who Jesus really is. In the verses just before our passage for today Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was. While the others say maybe John the Baptist, or Elijah, Peter is the one who declares him to be the Messiah, the Son of God, the one they had been waiting and hoping for. That is why when Jesus tells them he must suffer and die, Peter simply cannot accept it. The messiah was supposed to come in power he thought, to set them free from oppression and restore the glory of Israel. He could not be humiliated by the Romans, this would dash Peter's hopes, his expectations, and his faith. Peter had followed Jesus, put aside everything, and staked his life on a specific idea of the Christ figure. He had been looking for a certain Messiah, and he had found him in Jesus of Nazareth, so when there was more to this figure that challenged him, that even contradicted him, he simply could not accept it. No, that's not the story of the Messiah, Peter is saying, bring in the army and the force, throw out these Romans, rule us, but certainly don't suffer and die.

I cannot help but think how often I fall into the same trap as Peter, projecting my idea of who the Christ should be onto Jesus, and refusing those comments that simply do not fit my framework. I have read the scripture and found exactly what I was looking for. I found a Jesus who looks like me and talks like me, one who thinks like me and often acts as I would, he even cares about the causes that I do and glosses over the same sins I decide not to care about in my own life. Too often, I am reading the gospel hoping to find just enough grace to allow me to keep being who I already am.

This is my confession of how I sometimes read the gospels, but somehow I think I am not unique in this. How many of you love the Jesus who lovingly calls the children to himself, but want to ignore the one who angrily overthrew the money changers? How many want to read as literal the promise, "whatever you ask in prayer, believe in your heart that you have received it, and it will be yours," but choose to take the admonition "if any would follow me, he must sell everything he owns" figuratively? How often do we read the story where Jesus says "let him without sin cast the first stone," and cheer so heartily we never get to the part where he turns to the woman and says "now go and sin no more." As Jesus marches on toward the costly call of the gospel, we take him aside as Peter did, bring him on to our path, and try to divert him from leading us anywhere we don't want to go. We are looking for the Messiah who simply blesses us as we are, rather than asks us to be as he is. Too often, we act as though we are looking for Jesus but we only find ourselves. How awkward it is to project our own image onto this historical man in ancient Palestine. He is already busy being fully man and fully God, it is unfair to ask him to be fully me as well. We do it because it is comfortable, it is reassuring, but it is assuredly not the Messiah of the gospel. It is not the Jesus of our passage today.

Today, Jesus says, "Get behind me Satan." He says "whoever seeks to save his life will lose it." He says, "take up your cross and follow me." And he says, "if anyone is ashamed of me" by which he means the real Jesus expressed here in the fullness of the gospel, "then I will be ashamed of him." We could say many things of this Jesus, but he is not domesticated, he is not like me, and he is not out to win my vote of allegiance with platitudes and easy promises. He is the Jesus who offers the fullness of life to any who are willing to give up the emptiness that consumes our daily existence that we call life. He is the Jesus who scorns those holding on to vain idols, but gives infinite grace to any willing to approach with empty hands. He is the Christ who calls to himself those who will admit that they are empty, sick, and poor, who leads those tired of trying to plow their own path, but who says "get behind me Satan," to those still trying to hold up the façade of their broken life as though it were the proper image of the Son of God.

What Jesus is calling for today is the denial of ourselves, and along it with the idol of a god who is just a projection of ourselves. In its place he calls us to take up his cross, the task that is more than we ever dared think it to be, more than our narrow reading allows for. We must follow Jesus on the path he prepared rather than ask him to come along with us. If we follow that way he will recognize us and not be ashamed. Yet this burden is light because the life that Jesus calls us to is truly life. We must leave behind the life we have to grasp the grace of life eternal, that life that Jesus modeled in perfection. It is a life that cries out for sacrifice but more requires mercy, that presents a new moral teaching but moreover grace, a reality of the apocalyptic teacher that is also the fulfillment of the promise that has broken into the here and now. Jesus does undermine empire, but in its place initiates the new kingdom of God here on earth. This is Jesus the miracle worker, but the miracle is the life created in you when you give up the life of illusions we all cling to so tightly. Let this transformation begin with the Jesus of the Gospels. We leave behind looking for a figure who is historical when we find a companion that is eternal, and who eternally calls us on to something more than what we are, more than we think he is.

We read this passage in Lent because comprehending Jesus as the fullness of the Son of God does require a time in the spiritual desert, where the only food is the sustenance of the scriptures themselves. If we are to give up something this Lenten season I encourage it to be our familiar, comfortable, and domesticated views of Jesus. I encourage you to read through an entire gospel during these forty days, reading both the parts that are your favorites and those that challenge you. Experience the fullness of the Son of Man anew, as forgiver and exhorter, as friend, and judge, and savior. Let us wander this season through the gospel of the true messiah, who shocked, scandalized, and shook the foundations. It is scary because it is as though you let go of your own life, and your grasp on one who simply affirms who you are, and that is a great sacrifice; it is a journey through the desert with the temptation to return always to the tame and easy Jesus who asks little and overlooks much. But if we take this task to heart, I am confident that we will gain in the end a true and abundant life offered by a radical savior, we will find this cross exhilarating rather than burdensome, and we will experience the in-breaking of the very Spirit of God into our world and the resurrection of the authentic Christ on Easter morn.