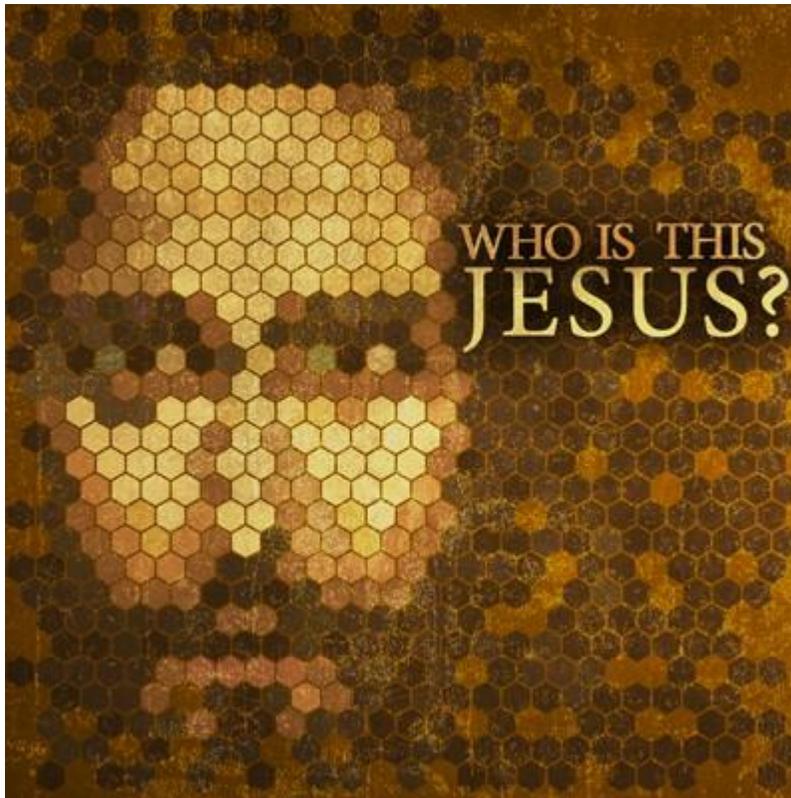


## WHO IS THIS JESUS?

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems  
February 22, 2015



THE OTHER NIGHT AFTER WORK I WENT TO CATCH THE BART TRAIN HOME. I boarded at the Civic Center station, where there were plenty of seats before we reached the busier stations downtown. On any normal weeknight, every coveted seat is claimed and people are standing so close it would be deemed sinful in many states. This made the other night stand out. As we departed the Embarcadero station, I had a seat *and* the seat next to me was still vacant. Why, might you guess, wouldn't anyone sit near me? No, my deodorant hadn't failed (at least I don't think it had). I wasn't wearing a muscle shirt to reveal my very intimidating biceps. I did, however, have a rather prominent cross on my forehead from Calvary's Ash Wednesday worship service.

For those new to church, Ash Wednesday is a time when many Christians receive a visible sign of our mortality and belonging to God from dust to dust (Genesis 3:19). The day marks the beginning of Lent, a time to intentionally commit to a focus on Christ and the hope of the resurrection on Easter. It's not a simple call to give up chocolate or single malt scotch—Lent is much deeper than that. We have a lunch and class right after church today that is open to everyone seeking to know more about the faith this Lenten season.

Back on BART, someone finally did sit in the open seat next to me at a station in Oakland. He was a rather large man who smelled like he had been celebrating Ash Wednesday in a very spirited way. After a minute, he reached into his bag and pulled out a can of beer that he proceeded to drink without even offering me any. He was mumbling something under his breath. A couple of stops later, another seat opened up and he immediately moved across the aisle. Even a drunk guy on BART wanted nothing to do with the weirdo with a cross on his forehead!

If a mark of ashes signifies a commitment to hope and love and peace, why would someone rather stand on a packed train than take a seat next to a Christian? How has the message of Jesus been distorted in ways that would drive people away?

This Lenten season, we'll be seeking to understand who this Jesus was before generations of "Christians" used his name and the cross in ways that did not point to hope and love and peace. We'll explore together to understand what it means to follow him into the world beyond this sanctuary.

Today's second Scripture lesson takes us back to the basics in the Gospel of Mark. Please listen for God's word to us:

**Mark 1:9-15** (*New Revised Standard Version*)

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news."

Long before he would be associated with the cross, people were trying to figure out who Jesus was and who they were in relation to him. For approximately 70 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, people shared this story with each other before finally writing it down in what became the Gospel of Mark. When it seemed like the world as they knew it could end at any moment, they shared this story with each other. Thankfully, they saved the story as it can help us understand who God is and how much our Creator loves us.

Today's Scripture lessons serve as reminders that **God claims us**. A little earlier in the service, Janis read from Genesis. It picked up just as God promised Noah and his sons that the Creator would never again destroy the entire earth with a flood. Our ancestors in faith understandably feared God after hearing stories of devastation. They didn't have satellites and geothermal maps and 400 weather channels of meteorologists with perfectly coiffed hair to explain weather patterns. The words of Genesis were very meaningful as God made a promise, an "everlasting covenant" with them. God claimed humankind from chaos, but the world didn't remain calm for long. Power hungry elite who did not obey God's laws inflicted injustice on the powerless for generations.

People in the world weren't just walking around singing "Silent Night" when Jesus arrived, waiting for the newborn king to grow up and take control. The world was as chaotic as ever, with the powerless at the mercy of Roman leaders and even religious leaders like me who were supposed to know better. When Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism, God claims him. Once again, we have visible a reminder of God's love for us. Once we are claimed, shouldn't life be enjoyable and predictable and shouldn't we determine what happens next?

That is the trap that followers of Jesus have fallen into time and time again. Paul and Peter and James in the earliest versions of Christianity wanted things their way. Priests prior to the Reformation knew they could make a few bucks by selling indulgences to forgive sins. Presbyterians and Methodists and Catholics continue to battle over who should be married or ordained or serve Communion. And in thousands of churches all across America, as we speak, our brothers and sisters are grumbling because the coffee was too weak or too strong or because an instrument they don't much care for was played in church. Some fight because the songs are too new. Some fight because the songs are too old or too fast or too slow. Of course, people of Calvary Presbyterian Church would never do that, right? Confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior does not mean that our ticket to heaven is punched and that we should just make ourselves comfortable until our time on this planet ends! As Christians fight like little children who don't know any better, it isn't surprising that people wouldn't want to sit by us or associate with us.

**God sends the claimed into the wilderness.** When God claims Jesus through baptism, it does not appear that John and his followers go out for a nice champagne brunch at the waterfront bistro on the river. Instead, Jesus goes on a miserable camping trip without so much as a can of pork and beans: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts." The Gospel of Mark does not provide many details, but these 40 days are the basis for our Lenten journey. Jesus endured temptation and encountered wild beasts, but he was not alone.

Before Jesus emerged from his trials and tribulations, the Gospel of Mark says, “**the angels ministered to him . . .**”<sup>1</sup> In his full humanity, Jesus needed help.

I recently met a man who endured one of life’s great deserts at a very early age. Before high school, both of Matt’s parents were out of the picture and he was living with his grandmother. Unable to cope with the situation, Matt’s grandmother reached a point where she could not pay the rent and they were both about to become homeless. Already having endured great loss, 16-year-old Matt did not know what to do. He mentioned the dilemma to a classmate who said his church might be able to help. Matt didn’t know anything about church or this Jesus guy, but he was desperate so he agreed. A leader from the church came to visit Matt, and listened to gain an understanding of the situation. The church leader then said, “Matt, I’m sorry. I have to go to a denominational conference, and our board is really trying to raise money for a new roof and I just don’t have time for you right now.”

The church person said no such thing!

He helped negotiate so Matt and his grandmother could avoid eviction, then invited Matt over to have dinner with his family. They didn’t just tell Matt to recite some formulaic prayer; they became an answer to prayer. They weren’t so busy talking about their status as God’s beloved that they forgot to make space for another. The church people *talked* about Jesus and told Matt about him, but they had already *shown* Matt who Jesus was to them.

As we head into a time of reflection, I invite us to consider who *we* say Jesus is . . .

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<sup>1</sup> David Bartlett suggested, “ministered to him,” rather than “waited on him” in the NRSV. February 3, 2014 in a *Preaching the Lectionary* Doctor of Ministry Course at Columbia Theological Seminary.

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