

August 30, 2020  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Twenty-fourth Sunday of on line worship

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### **Which Jesus?**

**Romans 12: 9-18, 21**

**Matthew 16: 13-18, 21-25**



*When Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

A reading from the gospel according to Matthew:

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”*

*Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Jesus! You are the Messiah! We have found our salvation. You are the Son of the Living God. Oh, how we need your salvation! Help us to hear your call, get behind you, following you, loving and living your powerful word all our days.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

One of the first churches that I visited on my recent sabbatical was Washington National Cathedral. It made sense to begin my study of Cathedral Congregations on the first Sunday in July in the house of worship President Washington envisioned as “a great church for national purposes.”<sup>i</sup> Congress granted the charter for the cathedral in 1893. Eighty-three years later President George H.W. Bush witnessed the placement of the “final finial” – completing the church on Wisconsin Ave as the sixth largest cathedral in the world, the seat of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and the Bishop of Washington.

Our preacher for the virtual Eucharist on July 5 was, to my surprise and delight, columnist and author, David Brooks. I’ve been reading Brooks’ new book The Second Mountain. Brooks’ background is Jewish; he’s married to a Christian and worships with her regularly in DC.

David Brooks began his sermon that day talking about Jesus the Jew. “I can’t but see him through a Jerusalem lens.”<sup>ii</sup> He said. He spoke about the harsh political environment into which the Savior came. The Jewish world 2000 years ago was an occupied land, full of “strife, combat and fractious intensity...a spiritual and literal battlefield.”<sup>iii</sup> Partisan fighting was endemic, “a profusion of cults and factions. ... Everything was fraught, semi-hysterical and tension filled. Minor league revolutionaries were perpetually rising up. [New Testament scholar N.T. Wright] lists seven separate revolts between 26 and 36 [AD].”<sup>iv</sup>

“I’m trying to describe a world where everything was loud...pressure packed.” Brooks continued, “When you see Jesus in this context, you see how completely bold and aggressive he was. He lived in a crowded, angry world.”<sup>v</sup> He faced stoning in Nazareth; he offended the rich in Capernaum. John the Baptist was beheaded for calling out the sins of the ruling class, and Jesus walked in his footsteps.<sup>vi</sup>

In that environment, Jesus’ habit of welcoming everyone who came -- even those whose whole intent was to abuse, oppose and insult him -- is remarkable. The things he taught and said -- “*Blessed are the meek. ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. ... Blessed are peacemakers,*” and his commandments: “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*” sound all the more surprising, even revolutionary in light of the political situation.

So who is this Jesus we think we know? There are many answers to that question, many lenses through which to see Jesus. Simon Peter and the other disciples had a number of answers to his heartfelt question, “*Who do people say I am?*” And so do we.

Scripture is full of answers to the question “Who is Jesus?” John, the gospel writer, calls him “*the Word*” of God, *the One who was, from the beginning, with God and was God. All things came into being through him*<sup>vii</sup> writes John. He is the Source of everything, and God’s only Son, the One God who came -- *not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*<sup>viii</sup> John 3:17. He is the Savior, the very Word of God.

At the same time the biblical writers agree that Jesus was entirely human. He was born to a human mother. He experienced hunger, fatigue and thirst. He suffered torture. He died a physical death and was buried.<sup>ix</sup> The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews said that as a result of his suffering he is *able to sympathize with our weakness* [because] *in every respect he was tempted as we are.*<sup>x</sup>

He was a fully human being who, in St. Paul's words, was also the perfect *image of the invisible God ... and in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*<sup>xi</sup> Paul wrote in Colossians. In Romans he called Jesus *the Christ who is God over all.*<sup>xii</sup> Jesus told his disciple, Philip, "*Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father.*"<sup>xiii</sup>

He was fully human and fully God. It's called Hypostatic (high-poh-static) Union, though Jesus never used that term. He said it in a much simpler way. He called himself "*the resurrection and the life.*"<sup>xiv</sup> "*I am the bread of life,*"<sup>xv</sup> He said, "*I am the light of the world,*"<sup>xvi</sup> "*I am the door,*"<sup>xvii</sup> "*the true vine,*"<sup>xviii</sup> "*the good shepherd.*"<sup>xix</sup> Jesus loved metaphors and parables. Sometimes he spoke in literal terms, calling himself, "*the way, the truth and the life.*"<sup>xx</sup>

On the day in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples about life's most urgent question. He asked them: "*Who do YOU say I am?*" Peter answered, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

God gave Peter that answer. Has that ever happened to you? Do you remember a time when you suddenly had the answer? Or a time when you could offer something, solve something, give something, do something that you knew perfectly well you were not good enough to do. Yet, there it was... the right answer, the problem solved, the gift given, the race run, the impossible concept explained. And. You. Did. It. That's a God moment, folks. *Flesh and blood did not reveal that to you, but God alone.*

Peter had a God moment. He answered life's most essential question: Who is Jesus to you?

He answered, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*" In Hebrew, Messiah, Deliverer, the One who saves.

We need a Savior about now, don't we? The earth and all creation are groaning. We are in agony – divided and diseased. Last Sunday I said that we are facing a three-fold crisis of health, unemployment, and racial inequality. One of you wrote to me and said, "No, no it's a four-fold crisis! Climate is the crisis that, if we don't act immediately, none of the rest will matter because there won't be a tomorrow." She's absolutely right. We must act and with responsibility in our God-given roll as stewardship of this planet God has entrusted to us. It is getting very, very late.

The biggest obstacle we face isn't climate and it isn't a disease. With more than 180,000 deaths it's hard to say that, but it true; because the stumbling block, the obstacle, the sin that keeps us from being able to resolve all these crises – is division. We are stubbornly refusing to come

together. We no longer listen to one another. We are polarized and angry. We have no shared vision. *Where there is no vision, the people perish.* Proverbs 29:18

On Independence weekend, in the pulpit of our National Cathedral, David Brooks said:

“Our country is in a storm, or maybe it’s an earthquake... We are struggling to rise to this moment. ... [We] are facing sins endemic so long in our culture ... we have to admit that a lot of today’s distrust is earned ... People lose faith in each other when people are untrustworthy to each other. ... If we don’t breathe the spirit of the nation, if we don’t have a fierce sense of belonging to each other, we aren’t going to sacrifice for the common good... When people lose faith in each other, the nation collapses.”<sup>xxi</sup>

That stung. But I knew immediately he was right. We are in serious trouble.

But there’s also good news. On July 5<sup>th</sup> Brooks went on to remember several other earthquakes and storms that have hit us in history, such as the storm of the 1860’s that brought the words of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds.”<sup>xxii</sup>

We can. With God’s help we can. The healing we need will only be possible with God’s help. Jesus came *that we might have life, and have it abundantly.*<sup>xxiii</sup> He has not abandoned that promise.

Who is Jesus? He’s the Savior, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He’s the One who prayed, “*Father, make them one as we are one, you in me, and I in you.*”<sup>xxiv</sup> Who is Jesus? He’s our unity.

He is the healer. He came to a community crushed by injustice and divisions and brought healing. And by healing I mean more than curing a few people of diseases. He brought an entirely new pattern for life, an ethic of peace clearly spelled out in his Sermon on the Mount, and illustrated by his metaphors and parables. He taught us how to live abundantly, love fully, and give sacrificially. Then he gave his life on the cross to show us how.

When Jesus rolled out the idea to his disciples, Peter pushed back. He pushed back hard: “No way, Lord! That can never happen to you!” That was when Jesus called him “Satan.” That’s not as bad as it sounds. Remember that in the gospels Satan is the one who tests Jesus’ metal. He’s the tempter, who tries to steer Jesus off of the path of salvation. “*Get behind me Satan!*” means “Stop tempting me! Get in line and follow me. Do what I do, live as I live.”

*“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

“The cross we bear always precedes the crown we wear.” That was one of Dr. King’s favorite phrases. It means that if we want to enjoy the glory that is his, we need to be prepared to make sacrifices like his.

Who is Jesus? He is our unity. He is perfect sacrifice, self-offering love. We cannot follow him if ease and security are our goals. We can’t follow him if we cherish our personal priorities, options, or our party affiliations too much. We can’t follow him if we love anything more than we love his kingdom. Again, from Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“To be a Christian one must take up his cross, with all its difficulties and agonizing and tension-packed content, and carry it until that very cross leaves its mark upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way which comes only through sacrifice.”

Sacrifice and self-giving love are the only things that can save us now. This is how Christ redeems us! Loving as he loved we will achieve the unity we need.

Here’s a true story that may help explain what I mean. Several years ago, Jim Wallis, the editor of “Sojourners” magazine, was speaking at a Christian college in California. Earlier that day it had been announced that the city where the college is located would be hosting one of that year’s presidential debates. The whole town was buzzing with the news and wondering how to get into the hall to participate.

During the Q&A that night someone asked Wallis what questions he thought they should ask the candidates. But Wallis turned the question around to the students. Remember, these were sons and daughters of mostly affluent, Christian families. Wallis asked them: “If you are able to get tickets to the debate what will you ask the candidates?” A sea of hands shot up – with a long list of important questions about student debt, taxes, pro-life, pro-choice, healthcare, jobs, the economy...

Then Wallis asked, “What do you think Jesus would ask if he were in that hall with the candidates?” Suddenly the room got very quiet. You could almost see the students thinking. Very slowly the first hand went up.

"Jesus would ask them how they were treating refugees and the poor."

Then another hand. "He would ask them to treat each other better too."

A white student said, "Jesus would certainly have something to say about racism." <sup>xxv</sup>

Who is Jesus? He’s the one who brings us to ourselves. He’s the Savior, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is the God who accepts our repentance and heals us, allowing us to come together “to bind up the nation’s wounds and make peace.”

St. Paul said this more eloquently than I ever could in his letter to the Romans from chapter 12.

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.  
Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.  
Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord.  
Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.  
Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.  
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.  
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.  
Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty,  
but associate with the lowly and do not claim to be wiser than you are.  
Do not repay anyone evil for evil,  
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.  
If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.  
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Let us pray:

Now to the one who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of God's glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever.  
Amen.

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- <sup>ii</sup> From the website of Washington National Cathedral, <https://cathedral.org/history/timeline/>  
<sup>ii</sup> David Brooks, "Beauty in a Storm" as sermon preached at Washington National Cathedral, July 5, 2020  
<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>v</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>vii</sup> John 1:1-4  
<sup>viii</sup> John 3:17  
<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 1:25, 21:18, John 19:28, Matthew 4:1, 16:21, 27:50, 27:60  
<sup>x</sup> Hebrews 14:15  
<sup>xi</sup> Colossians 1:15, 20  
<sup>xii</sup> Romans 9:5  
<sup>xiii</sup> John 14:9  
<sup>xiv</sup> John 11:25  
<sup>xv</sup> John 6:35,  
<sup>xvi</sup> John 8:12  
<sup>xvii</sup> John 10:9  
<sup>xviii</sup> John 15:1  
<sup>xix</sup> John 10:11  
<sup>xx</sup> John 14:6  
<sup>xxi</sup> Brooks, op. cit.  
<sup>xxii</sup> Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address  
<sup>xxiii</sup> John 10:10  
<sup>xxiv</sup> John 17:21  
<sup>xxv</sup> Jim Wallis, *Faith Works*, Random House, 2000, 210.