

# Why Jesus?

From the series: A Fresh Look at an Ancient Story

*Text: II Corinthians 4:6; John 1:15*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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My exposure to people of other faiths is minimal. Of those I have had, the relationships with the Jewish community have been the most meaningful, and I have been enriched through the work of the West Shore Committee for Jewish-Christian Dialogue. I have found Rabbi Alpert in Muskegon a princely man; Rabbi David Hartman from Jerusalem, who has been with us several times, so intoxicated with God, so full of the Spirit; Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, again a gentle scholar, devout and genuine.

I have known fewer Muslim folk, but there, too, far from the TV image of the Islamic terrorists, I found sincerity and a deep hunger for God. I've never really known Buddhists, but in our world today you can't help but be exposed to that in the media or through reading—a wonderful transformation of the human being through the path of dying to self and living in another consciousness.

Those experiences with people of other faiths have been enriching to me in recent years, whereas once they would have been very threatening. I was already open for them, I suppose, through the recognition of that universality of God's grace, and I was beginning to see how God revealed God's self and offered grace, not only through my own religious tradition, but through other traditions that were authentic ways and experiences of God.

In 1990 I sat in the magnificent cathedral in Chartres, outside of Paris. There was an Englishman who had lived there for many, many years and gave lectures. Malcolm Miller was his name, and he knew every nook and cranny, every stone. He pointed out something that I had not been aware of before, that the cathedral once was like the community library. People didn't read; they didn't have the printed page. But those stained glass windows told stories, and they became the means of teaching through which people learned and were moved by the biblical story. You can go through the cathedral and follow the biblical story from Creation to Consummation in stained glass.

As I sat in the Chartres cathedral, I could not help notice how the stained glass windows were diverse in the stories they told. And as I thought about it, I came to realize a parable of sorts. Suppose you came to church every Sunday and picked the same pew. You would only see one set of windows and only part of the story. So perhaps this cathedral is a parable of the respective religious traditions. What if the Christians were gathered in the nave, and they saw the light streaming through the windows there, while the Muslims were in the transept and looked at another set of windows. The Jewish people in the choir would be looking through that magnificent rose window, and the Buddhists off in the other transept would see something else. You get the picture.

It struck me that what made all of the windows luminous with teaching and meaning was a common source of light. Such a simple idea! But for me it was a parable, and it became a means by which I could move easily into that pluralism in which I live and move and have my being; that pluralism that recognizes in the great religious traditions of the world, the one eternal God manifest in light and conveying grace. For me this idea was so liberating, so freeing.

Of course, I've met a lot of other people for whom this is a very threatening idea. If their truth is not the only truth, somehow or another their truth is diminished. I don't understand that. For me it was the most liberating idea, because I could look at the other, the one who is different from me, and not see them as alien, not see them as a candidate for conversion or worse, a child of hell. I could see a fellow pilgrim, someone whose own pilgrimage could enrich mine through the nuances of that spirituality, and I, as well, might be able to be a means of grace to another. For me it was a liberating idea.

But if that is indeed the case, and I do believe it is, then the question this morning is, "Why Jesus?" Why all the fuss about Jesus? Why do I want Jesus to walk with me? Why, in this Lenten season, do we rehearse again the stories of the passion as we move toward Holy Week? Why Jesus? Why in our prayers and our hymns and our liturgies, why is there such a concentration on Jesus? Why Jesus?

Well, let me suggest why Jesus this morning. The apostle Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians, that second letter, makes a beautiful, concise statement, for he says: "We preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake, for the God who said let light shine out of darkness." In other words, the Creator God has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Why Jesus? Because we believe God is revealed there. We have seen, as I like to say, in the face of Jesus into the heart of God. Jesus is the embodiment of God. What we see there is reflective of the nature of God. So why Jesus? Because that Mystery that is God must somehow or other come into sharp focus for us, must come into some tangibility, and Paul says that to look into the face of Jesus is to get a clue as to the heart of God.

John, I think even more profoundly in the first chapter of his Gospel, says much the same thing. Paul was the first to write in the fifteen or twenty years or so after Jesus, but John wrote near the end of the century. The Gospel of John is a more philosophical, more thoughtful portrait of Jesus, because Jesus didn't come, you know. The kingdom didn't come, the heavens weren't opened, everything didn't come to consummation. The preaching of John the Baptist was not realized, and that apocalyptic hope seemed to come to nothing. And so, if it didn't happen the way they were anticipating it would happen, what did this Jesus encounter mean, after all?

I love the way John's Gospel has it. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only son of the father."

Oh, the law came through Moses, to be sure, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. There was, in other words, as Paul said, an unveiling, a revealing. But even more, there was that embodiment, there was that flesh; the Mystery took on human form and dimension. John says that which was in the beginning took human shape before our eyes.

I like the translation of that first verse, "In the beginning was the divine intention." The Greek word can bear that meaning. In the beginning was the divine intention, and that divine intention eventuated in a human being, so that the profound revelation of God is seen in the human.

John, the writer of that Gospel, was operating with his own cosmology, but what he said translates so beautifully into what we know about our universe: fifteen billion years ago a Big Bang; a cooling of the elements; the planetary system; the emergence of life; eventually conscious life; and a self-conscious human being. Then 2000 years ago there came a human being that made people say, "That's it! There it is. That's a clue to what God is. That is an indication of what we are called to be."

John's testimony was that divine intention from the beginning. Whether for John that was 4,000 years prior, whether for him there was the three-decker universe with heaven above and hell below, it doesn't matter. His cosmology was incidental. What he was saying is that in the beginning there was an intention, an intention that unfolded, a dramatic cosmic story that eventuated in the human and in a human, Jesus. For John that was the realization, the manifestation, the human statement of the divine intention.

The scientists in our day love to discuss and argue whether or not the universe was made for humankind. There are those who describe the anthropic principle which says that all of the fine balances, all of the things that have happened over these fifteen billion years eventuated in just the right setting, environment,

possibility toward life and for human life. And there are others who say it was willy-nilly, just an accident.

Well, you can make your choice; pay your money and make your choice. It doesn't matter, really, because here we are and we are looking to Jesus as the highest and the best, the realization of the intention of God. But I like to think of that divine intention being pervaded throughout by that serendipitous creativity of the Creator God. I like to think that all of the emerging, evolving biological, historical development, all of that, is the consequence of the lure of love, the Spirit that knows no coercion, but only persuasion, that beckons this process on to the point at which there was a human being. And in the midst of humanity there was a certain Jesus and they said, "My God, that's it!"

This understanding of Jesus is different than the understanding with which I began my life and my ministry. For me, Jesus in the tradition was that one who was with God in the life of the Trinity, who as the second person of the Trinity, came from outside and assumed our human nature, died for our sin, was resurrected and left again. He was a divine intruder, if you will, one who came as the gift of God to be the sin-bearer of the world in order that there might be forgiveness and reconciliation.

That's not how I understand Jesus, obviously, in what I have been saying to you this morning. I understand Jesus not as one who has come from the outside, from another realm. I understand Jesus as one who emerged in the process through the Creator Spirit, who became the embodiment of the divine intention, and whose life is the clue to God's purpose and meaning for human life as a whole.

How do I make that shift? Certainly that old conception comes from the New Testament, there's no question about that. How do I make that shift from an outsider divine coming in, bearing our sin and moving out again? I make it by understanding Jesus in the historical context in which he lived. This is where all of the historical Jesus research is so fruitful, because it shows us a concrete human being in his historical, social, political, and economic context. It shows us a human being who responded to his context, one who looked at the society of his day and saw the exploitation of imperial Rome and the collaboration of his own leadership of his people. Jesus saw the destitution, the hurt, the pain, the poverty, the despair, the powerlessness, and the voicelessness of the multitudes. He looked at them and saw them as sheep without a shepherd, harassed and tossed about. And somehow or other Jesus was able to communicate to them their dignity as the children of God, to remind them of the covenant of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Jesus was able to call forth their humanity once again.

Jesus also saw the power structures, the power brokers of his day. It was clear to him how the people were being used and abused, how the leaders kept forgetting that they were the servants of the people, not the masters of the people, not the

exploiters of the people. Jesus spoke truth to power. He went to the very center of the nation; the Temple of Jerusalem, and brought his word, his good news about another kingdom, an alternative way of being, and they killed him violently. And there, in that life, in that one, I see the realization of God's intention.

A couple of weeks ago I raised the question, "What's wrong with us?"

What's wrong with us? We live by animal instincts, that old survival instinct that we took with us from the jungle.

And I then asked, "Do we need God to be good?"

Can't we see it? Can't we understand how we destroy ourselves, destroy our planet, destroy society? Can't we see it? We're responsible, we have knowledge, we have relative freedom. Do we need God as some threat beyond us, some lawgiver from beyond? Don't we see it in our own lives and in our society and our day?

What's wrong with us? It is that we are not like Jesus? And what I see in Jesus is the only hope for the transformation of the world. Am I a dreamer? Of course, I'm a dreamer.

What do I see in Jesus?

I see peaceful non-resistance.

I see righteousness incarnate.

I see the truth spoken with integrity.

I see self-sacrifice.

I see a willingness to stand in one's truth, even at the cost of death.

I see one (and here I believe he is the incarnation of God) who meets evil with forgiveness and with grace.

I see one who meets hatred with love. "Love your enemies," he said.

I see one who gives us an impossible ethic in the Sermon on the Mount, concluding in Luke's version: "Be ye therefore compassionate as your father in heaven is compassionate."

I see Jesus.

Why Jesus? Because Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. No one will come to the experience of communion in the father's bosom without that spirit of

Jesus, that grace of Jesus, that truth of Jesus, that integrity of Jesus, that fearlessness of Jesus, that freedom of Jesus, that magnificence of Jesus.

It was April 15, 1984, Palm Sunday in this place. The title of the sermon was, "Jesus, You Are Really Somebody." I had come through my own torturous journey to see Jesus in all of his humanity rather than that second person of the Trinity, that divine savior, that one who came, as the true God, the true man, two natures with all of that Christological structure. I had begun to see Jesus in all of his humanity and I was so impressed.

It struck me that all along I really had seen a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for example, as far more impressive than Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer moved me. The story of his martyrdom moved me. Why didn't Jesus move me? Because Jesus was from the outside; Jesus lacked full humanity. Then, when I began to see Jesus in his humanity, I had to say, "Jesus, you are really somebody!" I had to begin to translate all of the symbolism, because all of our prayers and liturgical forms, our hymns, our anthems are full of the Jesus in that other conceptuality. I still must do that. I understand it as poetry, but when I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died, I see there a place of violence, where one who died gave expression to the divine intention from all eternity.

I want Jesus to walk with me. And when I see that cross and contemplate that life, then I know that such love, such strength, such grandeur of person reflective of the heart of the eternal God demands my soul, my life, my all. It's the only hope we have.

Lord, I want to be like Jesus.