

Calvary United Methodist Church  
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## **WHO IS JESUS?**

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### **Children's Message:**

Philippians 2:5-11

Well today you are all kids. Why not, right? So, I have here a pillow and a bear. How many of you had a teddy bear when you were a kid? How many of you still have a teddy bear? In the 80s if you had heart surgery at Polyclinic or at Holy Spirit or Harrisburg Hospital they gave you a bear, so when you coughed it didn't hurt so much. I saw all these guys running around, mostly guys, with teddy bears back then.

Well, this is what you do when you are going to take a rest. And you know for adults it's really hard for us to rest because we have on our minds things have to be done and if you have a Pennsylvania Dutch background...I knew a lady up in Valley View. She was 82 years old and she said she gets so tired she should take a nap, but "Oh my", she said, "I daresn't." I said "why?" She said, "What if someone comes to the door when you are taking a nap?" Who cares? Can't do it, but then I know on Saturday nights I usually don't sleep well because I'm thinking about Sunday. Sunday night I sleep great.

God wants you to rest. There's a Sabbath rest for His people. He tells them they can take a day off, you can rest because you are secure in Him, you are loved in Him and nothing can take His love from you. So you don't have to prove yourself to God, you don't have to do extra to make God think, "Well, he's not so bad after all." You don't have to do those things. You can just rest. And if you want a pillow and a teddy bear, why not? I got my first when I was 40. It's in my office. It was a \$100 teddy bear and at the time I thought I would have taken the hundred bucks. I'd have spent it; I still have the teddy bear.

Rest in Christ.

### **Message:**

Would you join me in a word of prayer? So, Lord, help us to hear from you today. And I pray that you would guide us in drawing close to you because you have drawn so close to us. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I went to high school with 3000 students and that was not the biggest high school in my area, but it was a bigger high school than many. I don't know, some of them around here are pretty big too. And I always wanted to be in a team sport, but I knew that I had to choose pretty carefully because we had these big, brawny football players. They crushed me. I was not in the league. The basketball players were way taller than me. Wrestlers were the compact and just

wiry. I was no good at gymnastics. I never could do that stupid pommel horse. You did it in gym when you you're in seventh and eighth and ninth and tenth grade. I could never do that. I'd watch people just kind of doing that thing, never could do it. Baseball players had arms like tree limbs. No one wore glasses. I did. So I ran track. I like running, you know, but I ran track because I figured hey, if I ever cross of them I at least could outrun them. That would be a pretty good idea. So, I joined the track team. But I found out when you join a track team you need a better reason than running away from people. We had a great coach. His name was Bill Welsh and actually he's in his 90s and to my knowledge he is still running half-marathons in his 90s. And he didn't just coach track, he taught track. He taught you how to pace yourself, to us good technique. When you get a stitch in your side how to run through it. Keep sight of your goal, which is pretty important if cross country is your sport. And he taught you how to be a good sportsman, how to be kind, humble with the other teams whether you won or whether you lost with your group. We would do runs in weather just like this, which at first was a little daunting and others wouldn't do that kind of thing, but you know, once you are warmed up you kind of reveled in it. It was really kind of fun. You'd be wearing maybe a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of gym shorts and your sneakers and socks and off you went and after about five minutes, I mean, you were just warm as toast, you were doing great. We would run a couple of miles that way. You know, it turned out to be pretty good training for this calling that I've had over the past decades because as a pastor, but certainly as a Christian too. It's important to practice, stay current in your faith, to warm up, to be a team player, encourage your teammates, be a good sport, to endure those long and lonely runs. Work through the tough places, as everyone here knows, there are tough places in this life. And the most important thing is to keep focused on your goal because for us that goal is a person and that person is Jesus.

Now, Jesus is an enigmatic figure. I looked for different words to say that, but I think that's the best word to say it. He is an enigma. I mean just who is? What is he? Is he a wisdom teacher? Is he a liberal rabbi who reinterprets Judaism for us? Is he some tragic figure that the system chewed up, spit out? Is he a heroic figure? Did he actually rise from the dead? How is it that Jesus' teachings transcend over 20 centuries of history and how is it that he's at the center of western history if not maybe the center of history since the first century. We have no independent historical references to Jesus from his own time. What few references we have, and there are only three or four that we have, are from Christians who passed them on to other people who reported them. So we don't have that much except what comes from the early Christian community. And the writings that we have from the Gospels are a part of that Christian tradition. And they have a bias about who Jesus is and what he did and it comes to us actually not as facts, not as tacks on...we can just run down the list. It actually comes to us as a story.

Now, John's Gospel, the last of the Gospels to be written presents Jesus as the embodied Word of God. Embodied means he's in flesh. And John just offers us the breath-taking sweep of Israel's history in the first 18 verses of Chapter 1. He presents God as Creator, who created in love. Nothing was made without God. And the Word was a part of that and the

Word was with God and the Word is God. And John presents Jesus as the embodied Word of God. And he presents God as the Creator from whom humanity separates themselves, but through God's initiative sends Jesus to condescend to us and some rejected divine infinitive. He came to his own, his own knew him not. But to those who accept God's gift, they are received as God's own children and they are brought in to a new and a transformative relationship through Jesus. He came to his own, the Gospel said, and his own did not receive him, but to those who receive him, to those who believe in his name he gave the right to become Children of God.

Now, the very name Jesus means, "The Lord saves," in the Aramaic or Hebrew it would be Yeshau. We call it Jesus because that's the western way to do that, but Yeshau was supplied to Mary by the Angel Gabriel, you've read that in Luke's Gospel. And to save, well that means to keep from harm. It means to liberate. It means to heal, to rescue, rescue from the power of evil. And saving is what Jesus does. And John's Gospel then echoes the Israelite narrative, the Jewish narrative with humanity created in the image of God, but choosing a path away from God, leading to alienation, leading to alienation from God, and even the self. Pain, suffering, humiliation, endless cycles of despair and death ensued, but it is God who intervenes in this cycle, which is what makes this faith we hold so different from every other tradition, that in Jesus God has come to us and dwells with us.

Now that word dwelled is also an important word. The Greek word is tent, that Jesus tented among us, he pitched his tent with us, shared our human experience. And what John is saying is stunning. He's saying that in the man, Jesus, God is with us as one of us. And so that is why we keep our eyes on him.

And John presents, as the Gospels all do, a fourfold pattern and the pattern is fancy theological word, I apologize, but hey, you've all been to high school, so it's not that hard, right? Incarnation, to be in flesh, enrolled with flesh. Incarnation, ministry, the cross, the resurrection; all the Gospels present this, that Jesus comes to us from the heart of God. His ministry was one of healing and reconciliation, but to do that he had to confront the powers of evil who don't want anything like that. Instead they want control, but control takes us all the wrong way. So confrontation is certainly encoded in the Christian story. And that confrontation ends at the cross where the worst that the world could offer was met by the best that God had to give. That God in Christ took upon himself all the sin and evil of the world and the resurrection was God's overthrow of the powers of evil and death itself. It's God's victory, the divine reversal of the power of death preeminently. And those who believe in this man, Jesus, are changed as though shattering the darkness.

And John believes that if you really know who Jesus is, then you'll believe that he is God's salvation, that saving word again, for the world. And that by following him, God will transform your life from darkness to light, from evil to the good, from death to everlasting life.

Now, one of the other Gospels offers us a story which is familiar to you, but it helps us un-

derstand Jesus' story and again you have the same pattern of incarnation, ministry, cross, resurrection. It's the story of the Emmaus journey, where on the first day of the week, that Sunday following the crucifixion on Friday, two disciples are travelling down from Jerusalem to Emmaus, seven miles down the mountain. These people are in deepest grief. They stayed over the Sabbath because no one travels on the Sabbath, but when that Sunday came, they were free to go home. They are walking down the mountain these seven miles and a stranger comes up to them and he says, "Why are you so sad?" He could see they are in deep grief. And they are like: Have you been hiding under a rock? Don't you know what is going on? These are followers of Jesus. They placed their hope in him and then they saw all of it fall apart as he was crucified as a common criminal and their sorrow was profound. And as this stranger walks with them, he begins to share with them, beginning with Moses and the prophets, about why God was going to send someone and how this person would die on our behalf. And as he is walking, these two disciples, their hearts are burning within, that the truth of these words and just illuminating them, shattering that darkness. And it makes so much sense. And he follows the pattern of incarnation, of ministry, of cross, and resurrection and as they near their home, they will offer him the simple hospitality that they would offer to any stranger, and he accepted. And when they sat down, they asked that, as they set the table he would pray the blessing. He takes the bread and he holds it up, perhaps he broke it, and he begins to pray and their eyes are opened and it is the Lord right in front of them right there, the Risen Christ. And they experience the sacrament of his saving presence and so that's why their hearts were burning with the truth of this man and his story and immediately they ran back up the mountain...that no small thing after you have just walked seven down, going seven back up as fast as you can...to go and see the other disciples in the upper room and say, "We have seen the Lord."

Now, in that encounter with scripture and in that simple meal, Jesus changed the direction of their lives. His presence creates the new community that we call the church, which is supposed to be a new kind of people. It's still working on that, but God is still working on it too. And this new community is never bound by tribal affiliation or even by language or by virtue of family or nationality. That God in Christ reached down to all of us when we were helpless to lift ourselves up. But Jesus unites humanity with divinity once again, thereby transforming what it means to be human and once again you can see people shining with the Glory of God or at least the potential for that.

This new community is a diverse community of equality where all are made one and they are made one through Him and we together are birthed into the Kingdom of God. If you read the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Revelation, there are people from every tribe and tongue and nation and color and race robed in white which signifies baptism and they are all one in Christ. And in this kingdom the restless hearts find their rest in God for it is in Christ that we discover the heart of God and the love of God for us and all creation. And this has the power to change the world.

One of the things the church has to come to terms with in the days to come is the changing

and the diversity in our nation, but already this church has a little bit of diversity and this area is very diverse. As we can open ourselves to that, the gifts that others have from other traditions, Africa, Asia, the Middle East. Do you know that there are Egyptian Christians all over the place in Harrisburg, because they were highly persecuted in Egypt, in Iraq, Iran, throughout the Middle East, in Somalia in particular and in many places? And so they are coming here for hope and for help and if we can be together with them as one in Christ, what a difference it would make for this church and for our future, because in Christ we are all one. As Paul said in Galatians 3: for we are one person in Christ, there is no slave, nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek, we are all one in Christ.

Now, I can't offer to you incontrovertible proof about Jesus. I can only offer you what the Gospel writers and what countless disciples through the centuries have discovered, but in Jesus, you come into contact with the heart of God, the God who loves you, who gave himself for you, and when you do, you are changed.

And when I learned so many years ago now in those long and lonely runs, in all kinds of weather, is to focus on the right goal and stay with your team and stay focused. If you are bored with your faith, unchallenged by what Jesus taught, unaware of his presence, you might consider you've taken your eyes off of him and you focused on a lesser goal. For those who believe in his name he gives right to become the Children of God. Amen.