

Who Is Jesus?

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Matthew 17:1-9 (Transfiguration)

“It is as strange a scene as there is in the Gospels. Even without the voice from the cloud to explain it, they had no doubt what they were witnessing. It was Jesus of Nazareth all right, the man they'd tramped many a dusty mile with, whose mother and brothers they knew, the one they'd seen as hungry, tired, and footsore as the rest of them. But it was also the Messiah, the Christ, in his glory. It was the holiness of the man shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it they were almost blinded.”

Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words*

Six or 7 years ago, the letters “WWJD” took on gigantic popularity. Do you remember? WWJD – “What would Jesus do?” Bumper stickers, T shirts, and millions of rubber bracelets dotted the land with those four letters. WWJD?

It’s an interesting question. When it was first posited, it was intended to be a simple question. In the face of complex issues – human sexuality, choice, economics, gun violence – let’s cut through it all and simply ask what would Jesus do?

Vegetarian and vegan versions of the question asked “What Would Jesus Eat?” Proponents of hybrid cars asked “What Would Jesus Drive?” Which kind of makes the point. Simple, to some, really meant simplistic. That is, Jesus would do what you would do, eat what you eat, drive what you drive, vote for who you vote for, on and on, and not the other way around. How does Jesus shape us, form us?

We shouldn’t be surprised that our understandings of Jesus reflect our own perspectives and experiences. But that doesn’t mean we throw the question out entirely as cynical or simplistic. It’s an interesting question. Perhaps even useful. Perhaps even faithful. But in order to be so, faithful, WWJD needs to be asked

differently. And it needs to be preceded by other questions. Which Jesus? Why Jesus? And today, who is Jesus?

What do you think of when you think of Jesus? Who is Jesus to you? This is not a question to which I am quite ready to say there are no wrong answers, but it's certainly a question that allows for some very broad parameters. Our hymns, for example, take us all over the place – from “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is calling” to “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” Is that two different Jesus-es, or two understandings or aspects of the same Jesus? That echoes the Bible of course, where we encounter Jesus comforting people and welcoming the children and casting out demons and overturning the tables in the temple.

In his book *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero writes that “Jesus has an American history. To hold him up to the mirror of American culture is to conduct a Rorschach test of ever-changing national sensibilities. What Americans have seen in him has been an expression of their own hopes and fears – a reflection not simply of some ‘wholly other’ divinity but also of themselves and their nation.”

Prothero describes at least four Jesus-es in American cultural understanding: enlightened sage, sweet savior, manly redeemer, superstar. Perhaps one of those typologies reflects your own understanding. Perhaps not.

Perhaps you've read what some have done because of an understanding of Jesus, actions taken, or done in Jesus' name, and because you've been so disturbed by that response that you've simply dismissed the questions, or maybe even dismissed Jesus. Perhaps you've pondered yourself questions about Jesus. What I was taught as a child contradicts what I believe as an adult, you say to yourself, so you've simply dismissed the questions.

I understand both of those responses. And yet...And yet I am suggesting we not shy away from the question, WWJD, and its preceding one, who is Jesus. These can be transformative questions, and worth the deep dive.

Yet at the same time I would never tell you what to believe, just as the best of our tradition would never tell you to turn off your mind when thinking about faith. In asking, let's not be willing to accept easy answers, or clichés. Let's not be willing to accept what others tell us. Let's be mindful of all the factors that give shape to our own answers, and be willing to unmask and unpack. Let's not accept all or nothing answers, and be willing to live with nuance, and complexity, paradox,

and even mystery. Simply an invitation to look again – eyes wide open, life experiences and cultural expectations fully considered – at who Jesus is and why he matters and how, perhaps, in asking the questions, you might be aided in answering what YOU would do as you live your life.

Though it can seem like a circular argument to ask what the Bible says about Jesus when asking these questions, I would much rather start with the Bible – our own reading of it – rather than relying on the interpretations of others. And to do that means looking at this morning’s gospel passage. It is called the Transfiguration, because of what happens to Jesus. Because what happens is so other-worldly, we are not quite sure what to make of it.

Jesus ascends a mountain with three of his disciples. And something happened – Matthew, Mark and Luke each describe it somewhat differently. In Matthew’s version, Jesus’ face shines and his clothes dazzle. Then an appearance by Moses and Elijah. Peter offers a rather ridiculous response, which we will let pass this morning. Then a bright cloud appears with a booming voice – echoing the voice that boomed out at Jesus’ baptism. 23⁴ “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples were scared to death, rightly so. And then it was over, except for the part where Jesus, curiously, swears his disciples to secrecy about the whole event.

What do we make of all this? Clearly the gospels want us to understand the primacy of Jesus. A beloved son, pleased by God. No one else fills that role. So we must consider seriously what that voice says.

And we must consider seriously who appears on that mountain, what was once described to me as a kind of divine, senior-level staff meeting. Moses is the leader, the architect of the Exodus, the one to whom God gave the law. So the law matters. But so do the prophets, in the form of Elijah, the prophetic word that continually calls the people back to the law. Does Jesus fulfill the law and prophets? Does he supplant them? And because we have been eyewitnesses to all of this through the disciples’ experience, how are we to understand, especially when Jesus shoots down further conversation?

The law matters. I’ve been re-watching “The West Wing” recently, and happened across a confrontation between President Bartlet and a conservative radio host. Mind you, this is some years back and the discourse has certainly changed. Nonetheless, the president, who knows his Bible and who demonstrates a

rigorous Catholic piety, makes the case for taking the law seriously, if not literally. What are the values of community that form the people? What are the fundamental ethics that prevent us from riding rough-shod over each other? How does the law, given to Moses at Sinai, play itself out in the life of the community, in respect, in honor, in dignity, especially to those on the fringes? And when Moses appears with Jesus on the mountain, that seems to say to me that Jesus calls us to double down on those values, that Jesus' very life is a living out of those communal values, by who he welcomes, by those with whom he shares meals, by who he heals, by those for whom he dies.

And Elijah, the prophet. Prophet-ing is tough business. Time and time again the prophet tells the people, and especially people in power, where they have gone astray. A king will not want to hear this, or a highly placed religious bureaucrat. Yet the prophetic drumbeat persists – justice, mercy, righteousness, reconciliation. Prophet-ing is a tough business. It will get Jesus killed. And when Elijah appears with Jesus on the mountain, that seems to me to say that Jesus calls us to double down on our own prophetic commitments. Speaking truth. Doing justice. That will mean different things to different ones of us, but it will never mean that we turn our backs, or our faith, on the culture and world.

I understand the impulse of WWJD. It seeks clarity and simplicity in an increasingly complex world. So ask that question. Definitely ask it. Just beware of easy answers. Because I think the better question is this: WWWDDBOWJI. What would we do because of who Jesus is?

How does Jesus call us to faithfulness and to prophetic living? What happens when we encounter Jesus at the top of the mountain? Even more importantly, how will we live our lives when we come down the mountain? What would we do because of who he is, this prophet, priest and king, this beloved one, holy and human, to whom we listen? What would we do? Amen.