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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
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John 12:20-33

**Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism:  
Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?**

So I began this sermon series back on May 17 with a basic overview of how Presbyterians read the Bible. I've looked at what the Bible says about Creation and whether it's compatible with Evolution; Adam and Eve and original sin; sexuality; the role of women; how we've misinterpreted some stories to make us feel better about ourselves, and violence. All in all, a total of 7 sermons – one of which was placed before me in a legal deposition. Who knew what I had to say would be so important!?

But today we come to the heart of the matter, the center of our faith, the reason we call ourselves Christian, and that is Jesus Christ. What does the Bible have to say about Jesus?

For some of you, that may seem like an odd question to ask – as if it's a given that the Bible is of one mind when talking about Jesus. But the Bible, specifically the New Testament, is not of one mind when talking about Jesus. In fact, there are as many ideas about Jesus as there are authors of the various New Testament books.

For sake of time, we're going to look briefly at how the four Gospels talk about Jesus, though I think it's worth pointing out that a lot of people's views of Jesus are interpreted through the words of the Apostle Paul, especially when talking about the role of women and human sexuality. Jesus was much more egalitarian in his view of women than Paul, and Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality, and yet there are plenty of Christians who aren't aware of that and continue to be oppressive because of how Paul interprets Jesus.

So, just thought that was worth pointing out.

I want you to think for a moment about what you might expect to find in a modern biography. You might expect to find the person's birth date and place, family make up, socioeconomic status, childhood influences, education,

achievements, and some juicy tidbits about his or her life. We would expect or hope to find as many details as possible about the person's life, and we certainly wouldn't expect to find something in there that was a lie or considered spin, at least from a reputable author.

Ancient biographies, however, were different. They weren't written to satisfy our craving for details, and they weren't written to trace the development of a person's life. Ancient biographies, the Gospels included, were written to tell a story that proved the author's point. And because of this, the author, including the writers of the Gospels -- who may or may not have been named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John -- but for the sake of ease I'll refer to them with those names -- and because of this those authors pulled together different stories or highlighted certain character traits to prove their points. And sometimes, there may even have been room to include fiction. Which may sound a little blasphemous to some of you, but remember -- we don't read our Bibles literally, and the truth we find in a story is not dependent on that story being factually true. We can, for example, believe the Virgin Birth is true not because we believe it is factually or scientifically true, but because we believe, just like Mary proclaims, that nothing is impossible with God; or we believe the truth that somehow, some way, the powerful will be brought down from their thrones, and the lowly will be lifted up; that the hungry will be filled with good things, and those who don't help them will be sent away empty -- all of which Mary talks about in her song in Luke's gospel.

So when we read the four Gospel accounts of Jesus, we're better off thinking about them as versions of ancient biographies rather than literal accounts of Jesus' life. Because each writer points to a different essence of Jesus, each writer tells Jesus' story differently.

In Mark, the earliest Gospel written around 60 CE, we have Jesus the misunderstood, suffering Son of God. The stories Mark tells support this view, that the Son of God Jesus was, was not the Son of God people expected. In Mark we have what scholars refer to as the "Messianic secret", which are stories in which Jesus tells his disciples to tell no one what they know about him; Jesus wants it to be a secret that he's the Son of God, because he's not the Son of God

the Jews are expecting. So there's story after story about people misunderstanding Jesus.

Matthew's portrayal of Jesus is quite different than Mark's. Matthew, written around 70 CE, is often thought of as the most Jewish of gospels, because Matthew wanted his community to believe that Jesus was the long-anticipated Messiah the Hebrew Scriptures talk about. Matthew's Jesus is intimately connected to the people, traditions, and scriptures of the Jews, and often quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is often seen as fulfilling the words of the Old Testament prophets, and even his lineage in Matthew 1 is traced back to Abraham.

Luke, and full disclosure here – Luke is my favorite Gospel -- was written a little later than Matthew, and portrays Jesus as a Savior who came to set free the downtrodden and oppressed. Jesus addresses the problems of the world in Luke, and salvation happens in the world when society's problems are addressed. Luke's Jesus talks a lot about the poor and outcast, rescuing the oppressed, spending money, and highlights the role of women. And all of this is set in motion with Mary's Magnificat, which I talked about early. It's no accident that Luke tells a story about Jesus being born to a young, poor woman or includes Jesus' first sermon about bringing good news to people outside the margins and gets run off a cliff for that. The other gospel writers don't include those stories, because that's not the Jesus they're trying to portray.

And then there's John, the latest Gospel, that's on a plane all by itself. Many people find John to be their favorite gospel and know many of its famous "I am" sayings: I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the light of the world; no one gets to the Father except through me; for God so loved the world; I am the Bread of Life. John depicts Jesus as the One sent from Heaven, who was in the beginning with God. John also depicts a dualistic world; there is light and dark; spirit versus flesh; above and below; and people are either with Jesus or they're not (there's a strong note of anti-Semitism in John, as well). Sometimes when reading John out loud I cringe at how John depicts "the Jews". And again, it goes back to John's point of you're either with him, or not.

So that, in a nutshell, is a very brief overview of how the Gospel writers interpret Jesus. Maybe you've learned something new this morning. If so, I'm glad.

But I'm going to assume – and I realize I should be careful with assumptions – but I'm going to assume that you're here this morning for a reason deeper than just learning about Jesus. I assume, and hope, you want to experience Jesus, too. That like those Greeks in John's story that Dianne shared with us, you want to see Jesus, too.

“Sir, we would like to see Jesus,” the Greeks said to Philip. And of course, wouldn't we all like to see him? To *really* see him? Isn't that why, in some respects, we try find every kernel of information we can about him?

But I'm going to assume that many of you want more than a Bible 101 lesson on Sunday mornings, you want to find meaning in the Bible and its stories, too; you want to discover what God is trying to tell us here and now, so that it becomes God's Word for us today. You want to take the knowledge in your head, and also have your heart in it, too.

“Sir, we want to see Jesus”, but not just see him. We want to *really* see him; to see him for who he really is; to know him, and to experience him.

A few years ago Frederick Buechner wrote the text for a photographic book entitled The Faces of Jesus. The faces depicted were really quite remarkable, portrayed by artists in stone and marble, oil and watercolor. There were the faces of an African Jesus, a Japanese Jesus, an Italian Renaissance Jesus, a Polynesian Jesus; faces of an angry Jesus, a compassionate Jesus, a suffering Jesus, and a loving Jesus.

But of course, it's not so much the face of Jesus that those Greeks wanted to see, but the man inside, the one about whom they had heard about, whatever they had heard. It is what any of us wants of another, to reveal something of the true self, the inner being for which the face is only the exterior. Our true face is more than our bearing, the way we raise an eyebrow, or squint our eyes, or part our hair. It is the interior person we want to see, the soul of a person. These visitors from the Greek Diaspora wanted to see Jesus, wanted to know him and what made him different from others.

And of course, if you read the gospels, as we have learned, you do see his face, many of them, in fact. But do we want to just see him and know about him, or do we really want to see him and know him?

I was struck last week, when thinking about this sermon, at what a blog writer wrote and asked his fellow Presbyterians: do we know God, or do we just know a lot about God? ([www.johnvest.com](http://www.johnvest.com)) It's a fair question to ask, because Presbyterians are people who use their brains. We want to know what the Bible says about Jesus; we're not scared off by the fact that there are many different interpretations of Jesus in the New Testament. And that's good. Very good.

But at the end of the day, does any of it matter if we don't somehow experience God, too? Because friends, as this blogger wrote:

*God is not an idea. God is not the words we use to talk about God. God is not the words the Bible uses to talk about God. Ultimately, all of the words we use to describe God are metaphors, incomplete and provisional.* ([www.johnvest.com](http://www.johnvest.com))

God is much more; much more than the words we speak or write can ever contain.

At the end of the day, friends, it's not only what we know about Jesus that is important, it's that we know him to do – as murky and confusing and flabbergasting as that may be at times. It's that we know him and trust him enough to follow him. As Presbyterians, when people join the church or get baptized in the church and are ordained to serve as deacons and elders in the church, we don't ask people what they know about Jesus, or even that they believe in Jesus, we ask "Do you trust in Jesus Christ?" That's a statement of the heart, not of the head, and to me it's a harder question to answer than the belief question. Because while we can, and should, acquire all the knowledge we can so as not to be ignorant Christians, at some point in time we must be willing to acknowledge that the only way we can truly know Jesus is to follow Jesus. And that takes trust.

And that is the one point all of the Gospels have in common. That at the end of the day, if you're going to claim to be a person of the Way, as followers of Jesus were described at the very beginning, you need to follow *in* his way.

Amen.