

Beginnings

What is it that we believe?

That's the fundamental question, isn't it?

What is it that we believe?

Probably we'd be shocked at the range of beliefs held by various people about Jesus.

For some he is the Lilly white, blue eyed, blond who is as harmless as a fly.

For others he is a man in appearance only — sort of an ancient Superman who only seemed to suffer, to worry, to endure the sharp edge of betrayal, to die, but in fact, they say, he faked it all.

Some say he is something else entirely.

The writer of the Gospel of Mark is himself faced with these very same questions.

Long before the gospel was written down, there were stories told about Jesus, passed from mouth to ear by oral tradition, and even in the earliest days, there was confusion and misunderstanding and outright nonsense about who Jesus is.

So Mark set out to write down who Jesus is as seen and understood through the eyes and ears of St. Peter.

Who is this Jesus and what do we believe?

We are faced with these same questions all these years later because of that very human compulsion, a compulsion as old as humanity, to try to make God look like us rather than bending ourselves so that we might begin to look more like God.

And so we invent heresies like "God and Country," that seemingly innocent, but deeply sinister effort to claim God's blessings on whatever action our patriotism or self-interest demands.

Or we create ego driven traps of "just you and me Jesus" — "just you and me"— and the rest of the world can go to hell.

Or we turn Jesus into a crusading ideologue, whether from the left or the right, it really doesn't matter which — who divides the world into good guys and bad guys, into us vs. them.

Or maybe we reduce Jesus to a wise teacher, just a regular guy with some pretty cool insights.

So every year around this time, during this season of Advent, we start again – detoxing really, as we return to the beginning to ask, yet again, who is Jesus, this Christ, the Son of God?

And what we might come to see, what we might come to remember, yet again, is that God's ways are not our ways, so that to follow Jesus means learning, over and over again, to set aside our natural impulses that insist on a God who looks like me and to return to a life of bending ourselves so that we might look more like God, this gentle God who comes to us in deep humility, who urges us to find that true strength is found in surrender, that true love is found in self-giving, that true life is found only after we walk through the shadow of the valley of death.

In other words, when we ask who Jesus is we are drawn back with great power to the very beginning of all things: when God creates this world as a gracious gift given freely to all.

We are reminded yet again that God creates us to be not servants or slaves, but God's own partners; to tend to, to care for, to oversee the glory that is creation.

This is the life to which the Jewish people were called when God heard their groaning in captivity, when he freed them and made them a people, when he blessed them with land and children and abundance.

They were, they are, called to live lives of generosity and welcome; lives lived out with a radical reliance on God's promise to meet all their needs.

This is the beginning that Jesus calls his own people back to; this is the beginning that Jesus calls all people to.

In Jesus, God insists that God's vision of a gracious, bountiful, forgiving and forgiven life will prevail; and this insistence is not measured in mere words or empty promises, but in God's willingness even to die at our hands to see this vision through.

It is in the death and resurrection of Jesus that the fundamental truth is given to us all; the truth that death is not the last word; not for Jesus, not for us; not the small deaths that come whenever we reconcile, whenever we forgive; nor the death that comes when we each of us close our eyes for the last time.

And there is this.

To be at the beginning is to find that we are no longer prisoners of the past.

That's the message of John the Baptist.

It's why he attracts the tax collectors and prostitutes, why he attracts those who know they need a new day, a fresh start.

It's why those so invested in the status quo reject John, reject Jesus.

To be at the beginning is to find that we are no longer prisoners of the past.

We can let go of our idolatries, our regrets, our greed, our fears.

We can begin again. David Lose, paraphrased.

That's why "this is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," because in each human life, in yours and mine (and in young Grayson's life), the miracle of God's love for humanity is born anew, and we are invited to swim in it, to eat it, to drink it, and to make it our own.

Never forget who you are.

Never forget who you are destined to become.

"This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Are you ready for the ride?

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