

Now is the Time!
Part of the Advent Sermon Series "Who is Jesus?"
Mark 1:1-20

John W. Vest
Fourth Presbyterian Church—4:00 Worship
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In the rhythm of the church's liturgical calendar, the season of Advent is a time of preparation. Similar to Lent, during which we prepare for the mysteries of Holy Week and Easter, Advent is a time of meditation, introspection, and reflection as we prepare for the mysteries of Christmas.

Of course, the primary way our culture prepares for Christmas doesn't involve much mystery at all. This past Friday—Black Friday as it's known—kicked off the holiday buying season that our consumer economy so heavily relies on each year. Money is the driving force of our secular Christmas. Even Santa Claus, whose legend has legitimate roots in the hagiography of St. Nicholas, has become not much more than a character in a far-reaching advertising campaign, perhaps the original viral ad campaign.

But the church's observance of Advent is meant to be a time of soul searching and theological reflection. You see, Christians actually do proclaim a mystery of profound significance. The theological term we use to label this mystery is *incarnation*. According to this foundational Christian belief, God somehow entered human history in a special—some say unique—way in the person of a first century Jew named Jesus.

Born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River, this man traveled throughout the region of ancient Palestine known as Galilee, preaching a radical interpretation of Judaism and calling people to follow him in a new way of life. When

news spread of his growing following, bolstered by tales of miracles that accompanied his teaching, the religious and civil powers of his day were threatened. After making his way to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover, a conspiracy was hatched to capture him, torture him, find him guilty in a bogus trial, and publicly execute him as the leader of an insurrection against the Roman Empire. After his death and burial, his followers made the bold claim that God had intervened to resurrect him from the dead. According to their accounts, he ascended into heaven to reign over creation at the right hand of God Almighty. At some point in the future, they believed he would return to finish the revolution he started, this time bringing with him the fullness of God's power and wrath to overthrow and crush the enemies of God's people.

Most of his followers believed that his return and the apocalyptic revolution to follow would occur within their own lifetime. Nearly two thousand years later, we recognize that their timing must have been a bit off. Perhaps other aspects of their apocalyptic vision was off too.

In any event, Jesus' followers gathered as communities of faith that eventually grew into powerful institutions that literally took over the Western world. Along the way, these followers became ever more bold in their claims that Jesus was not only filled with God's Spirit but somehow part of God's very being. *Incarnation* became their way of understanding how God literally took on flesh and dwelled among us. The God of all creation, Yahweh of the ancient Israelites, had assumed human form in this man Jesus. According to another mystery, known as the Trinity, God the creator, God the savior, and God the Spirit all coexist in a complex relationship called *perichoresis*. In this way, Jesus lives still—in heaven, in our communion, in our lives, in the love we share with the world.

So if you want mystery during the holidays, we have it for you right here.

During these weeks of Advent, the Jazz at Four preachers will be sharing with you our particular visions of who this Jesus is and why we believe he matters for us, as individuals and as a community of faith. As contemporary followers of this Jesus, what we say about who he is says a lot about who we think we are and what we believe is our place and purpose in the world. If Jesus calls us to follow him, we need to have a sense of whom it is we are following. What is his vision of the world and the way we should be in it? Who does he call us to be? What does he call us to do?

Though this kind of theological reflection fits well within the framework of what we should be doing during the season of Advent, we have a broader purpose as well. As this worship service has been growing and taking on an identity of its own, we are aware that we are truly becoming a community of faith. What we do here is not just a program of Fourth Presbyterian Church. We are a unique faith community that provides a unique worship experience for the people of Chicago. Even more, Adam, Judy, and I believe that Jazz at Four is a unique outreach opportunity, a chance to reach out into our city to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom that Jesus proclaimed so long ago, to do the work Jesus calls us to do, to bring others into this faith community, and to advance the mission of transformation that God has already begun in our midst.

As each of us offer our individual answers to the question, "Who is Jesus?", please do not take this as our attempt to provide an authoritative articulation of what this community does or should believe about Jesus. Rather, we intend for these sermons to be a starting point

for an ongoing conversation among our community. We want to discover our vision of Jesus together.

You will no doubt find that the three of us answer this question in three different ways. This should not surprise or trouble you. In fact, we assume that everyone who gathers here for worship will answer this question in a slightly different way. Despite the church's attempts throughout history to impose a single orthodox articulation and interpretation of faith, the reality is that diversity and plurality have always characterized Christianity. Today, we are bold enough to claim that this is our strength, not a weakness. We embrace our diversity and all the ambiguity that comes with it.

So we invite you to join us on this journey of discovery and community formation. Hear us as we share with you our answers to the question, "Who is Jesus?" But more importantly, as we immerse ourselves in mystery during this season of Advent, take up this question for yourself. Who is Jesus for you? What do you believe Jesus offers the world?

Let me start with this: my fundamental approach to reading the Bible is to take seriously the independence and uniqueness of each book of the Bible. It is a misrepresentation of our scriptural canon to suggest that the Bible is a completely unified collection of writings. Rather, the brilliance of our canon is that it brings together into one body of literature diverse writings written by many different people at very different times for a variety of different contexts. The fact that these diverse texts are held together as an anthology does not mean that they each say exactly the same thing about God and the world.

This is especially evident in the four canonical books about the life of Jesus, the four canonical gospels. Though they are essentially writing about the same thing, Matthew, Mark,

Luke, and John each have a different take on Jesus. Their theologies about his nature and purpose are each slightly different. Perhaps the clearest contrast is between Mark, the first of our canonical gospels to be written, and John, the last to be written. In Mark, Jesus fully embodies his humanity. The precise nature of his relationship to God is ambiguous at best. The meaning of his death is mysterious. The facts of his resurrection are vague. By contrast, in John Jesus is clearly and fully divine from the very beginning. Jesus is unquestionably God incarnate, and belief in this claim is lifted up as the essential element of Christian faith. These two books of the Bible do not say the exact same things.

I think it is vitally important that we have such different visions of Jesus canonized as sacred scripture. It is a perfect reflection of how the church really is. Though we all follow Jesus, my hunch is that each of us understands who he is in a slightly different way. And as we read the Bible, each of us probably find biblical visions of Jesus that are more like our own, and we each find biblical visions of Jesus that challenge or even confound us.

Among the portrayals of Jesus in the four gospels, I am most drawn to the one found in the Gospel of Mark. In this gospel, the simplicity and straightforwardness of Jesus strikes me as authentic and compelling. The ambiguity and mystery of his nature ring more true to me than highly formulated doctrines and dogmas. The Jesus of Mark is direct and to the point. He is a charismatic preacher of a radical gospel of transformation.

I'm less compelled by the theologized Jesus of John's gospel. I'm moved even less by the articulations of later Christian theologians. When I mentioned on Facebook that I was working on this sermon, a friend of mine from seminary, who now holds a PhD in philosophical

theology, suggested that all I need to answer the question of “who is Jesus?” is this: “fully kenotic self-actualization of the divine.” Sorry, that doesn’t do much for me.

At the same time, the lily white Jesus of church tradition leaves me just as flat. I don’t think that Jesus looks like any of these:



Truth be told, I relate more to a Jesus that looks like this, a forensic recreation of what a first century Jewish man probably looked like.



For me, Jesus was a very real man who lived in a very real place nearly two thousand years ago. I believe that God was present in his life in a special and powerful way. Indeed, I believe that God’s image was revealed in Jesus such that in Jesus we see what God wants us to be. His death was a tragedy, the natural consequence of speaking truth to power. His resurrection was God’s way of reiterating the hope of the entire Bible: there is nothing, no

situation, no mistake, no reality—not a single thing—that is beyond the redemptive power of God’s love.

For me, what Jesus himself did and taught is much more important than a list of beliefs and doctrines about Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is less concerned with what we believe about him. He is more concerned that we hear his message—his good news—about the kingdom of God.

In college, a great New Testament scholar taught me that when you read one of the gospels, it is very important to pay attention to first public words spoken by Jesus. It is in these words that we discover the essence of his message that each gospel writer is trying to convey.

So, for my text this afternoon, I want to read the beginning of Mark’s story of Jesus. For me, it captures both the essence and the urgency of Jesus’ message.

[Mark 1:1-20 \(Common English Bible\)](#)

“Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!” These words of Jesus have become for me the quintessential expression of what Jesus was all about.

“Now is the time!” The message of Jesus isn’t about the past. It isn’t about the future. It isn’t about a heaven or a hell somewhere else. It’s about right here, right now.

“Here comes God’s kingdom!” In and through Jesus and his message, the world is changing. God’s kingdom—a way of naming what God wants the world to be, a way of naming how God is re-creating the world—is emerging all around us.

The world now is a mess. Corrupted by sin, our relationships with God and with each other are broken and damaged. We are surrounded by needless violence, pain, and suffering.

God's children are marginalized and oppressed. We do not recognize each other as sisters and brothers, equal in the eyes of God. We are divided. We are estranged. We are lost.

But this is not the way it must be. Through Jesus, God calls us to something better. Through Jesus—through the way Jesus lives and grows in us—God's kingdom is coming to be. Reconciliation is possible. Inclusion is possible. Peace is possible. Redemption is possible. Rebirth is possible.

“Change your hearts and lives!” In order for this to happen, things need to change. *We* need to change. Through Jesus God is doing something remarkable, something new, something radical, and Jesus is calling us to get on board.

This is the hard part. You see, what Jesus wants us to be and to do is not what we choose to do on our own. Our way is self-centered, narcissistic, idolatrous. Our way cares only about ourselves and little about others. Our way wreaks havoc in the world through violence and consumption. Ultimately, whether we acknowledge it or not, our way leads to death.

Jesus calls us to life. Jesus calls us to a different way. Jesus calls us to his way.

The question is, how will we respond? Can we see past our own desires? Can we transcend our hubris and pride? Can we love God with our entire beings and love others as much as we love ourselves? Like his most faithful disciples, can we leave everything behind—even those things that are most important to us—and follow Jesus into God's kingdom?

“Trust this good news!” Friends, this message of Jesus, this gospel of Jesus, is not bad news, it is good news. It is not about guilt. It is not about humiliation. It is not about punishment. It is good news of reconciliation and transformation for all of God's creation.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the one who comes to us and announces the good news of God's emerging kingdom.

"Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"

Amen.