

Lives of Jesus

(Job 38:1-7, 40:2-4, 42:2-6; Mark 8:22-33; I Corinthians 13:1-13)

A blind man was brought to Jesus. Upon first contact with Jesus, the man could see, but he still couldn't see clearly. He saw people, but the people looked like trees walking. It took more time with Jesus for the man to see clearly--to see people as they really were.

After this encounter with the man who had been blind, Jesus wanted to know how clearly others were seeing him. So he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples said that people saw Jesus not as a tree but nonetheless in a number of different ways! To some, Jesus looked like John the Baptist. To others, he looked like Elijah. Still others thought Jesus looked like a prophet.

Jesus asked his disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Messiah." With this response from Peter, according to the Gospel Writer Mark (8:33), Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."

This has come to be called the "Messianic secret." But maybe the reason for the secrecy was simply the fact that Jesus wanted people to discover who he was for themselves. Maybe he wanted them to see clearly for themselves instead of trusting in what someone else said.

And let's face it. Seeing Jesus as Elijah, John the Baptist, a prophet was just the beginning. The Bible is full of different ways that different people saw Jesus. The Bible describes Jesus as the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:8; 22:13); the Author of Life (Acts 3:15); the Bread of God (John 6:33); the Bread of Life (John 6:35; 6:48); the Bridegroom (Mt. 9:15); the Capstone (Acts 4:11; 1 Pet. 2:7); the Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20); The Stone the Builders Rejected (Acts 4:11); the Christ (1 John 2:22); the Deliverer (Rom. 11:26); the Firstborn From the Dead (Rev. 1:5); the Gate (John 10:9); the Good Shepherd (John 10:11,14); the Great High Priest (Heb. 4:14); the Head of the Church (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23); Immanuel (Mt. 1:23); the Judge of the Living and the Dead (Acts 10:42); the King Eternal (1 Tim. 1:17); the King of the Jews (Mt. 27:11); the King of Kings (1 Tim 6:15; Rev. 19:16); the King of the Ages (Rev. 15:3); the Lamb of God (John 1:29); the Man from Heaven (1

Cor. 15:48); the Master (Lk. 5:5; 8:24; 9:33); the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 9:15); the Morning Star (Rev. 22:16); the Resurrection and Life (John 11:25); the Righteous Branch (Jer. 23:5); the Rock (1 Cor. 10:4); the Root of David (Rev. 5:5; 22:16); the Savior (Eph. 5:23; Titus 1:4; 3:6; 2 Pet. 2:20); the Son of David (Lk. 18:39); the Son of God (John 1:49; Heb. 4:14); the Son of Man (Mt. 8:20); the One Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5); the True Bread (John 6:32); the True Light (John 1:9); the True Vine (John 15:1); the Truth (John 1:14; 14:6); the Way (John 14:6); the Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24); the Word (John 1:1); the Word of God (Rev. 19:13). It's hard to believe that everyone was talking about one man, one life, when it comes to Jesus.

And even beyond the writing of the Bible, since the writing of the Bible, throughout the centuries, how differently people have continued to see Jesus of Nazareth. For some have seen Jesus as the Prince of Peace, while others have seen him as just the opposite--the one for whom they killed others in the Crusades, the Inquisition, colonialism, and the KKK. Some have preached Jesus' gospel as the gospel of love, while others have preached his gospel as the gospel of fiery judgment. Some have seen Jesus as tolerant, inclusive, and accepting, and others have seen him as the lord of only their church. Caucasians have seen him as white-skinned; Africans have seen him as black-skinned; and Asians have seen him as yellow-skinned.

And theologians have seen him differently too. There's a joke in seminaries about today's gospel. "And Jesus spoke to Peter saying 'Who do men say that I am?' And Peter answered, 'You are, according to Paul Tillich, the very ground of our being. You are Emmanuel Kant's categorical imperative. You are the man of the Eschaton, the ultimately determinative one!' And Jesus looked at Peter and said, 'What?'"

We're all aware of how the media can take things and completely blow them out of proportion. We know that oftentimes the images of celebrities are distorted by the media. In fact, one soap-opera star said, "I don't even recognize myself in the things that are said about me. I read an article, and I say, 'That couldn't be me!'"

The same thing has happened with Jesus. Dostoevsky pointed this out in his story "The Grand Inquisitor." According to the story, Jesus returned to

earth in the days of the Spanish Inquisition, thus threatening to challenge the immense structure and power that had developed over the centuries in the Catholic church. The old priest, hardened by years of political struggle in the church, recognized Jesus and confronted him. He didn't want Jesus messing up everything that the church had set in motion. So he ordered Jesus out of the city. The priest chose the church over the lord of the church! He chose the image of Jesus that the church had created and needed to maintain its power over the real Jesus!

I think of that preacher in Arizona last month preaching in Jesus' name that he was going to pray for President Obama's death and urging the other followers of Jesus in his church to join him! This preacher has manufactured an image of Jesus that fits his own personal agenda. His image of Jesus certainly doesn't reflect the Jesus that I see in the holy scriptures and have known in the holiest moments of my life.

Indeed, just as in Jesus' day, there is no shortage of answers to Jesus' question: "Who do people say that I am?" And even if we, like Peter, recognize Jesus as the messiah, there are still all sorts of ways we may see him as the messiah or savior. Back in Jesus' day, many thought the messiah would deliver them with a sword. But Jesus proved to be a suffering servant messiah--a messiah who would lay down his life to save others.

To recognize the real Jesus, I would suggest two things. First, that we read the gospels repeatedly so that we are thoroughly familiar with the words and the actions--the character--of Jesus of Nazareth as he is described there. And secondly, we need to be serious and intentional about our personal relationship with Jesus. The "Messianic secret," remember, may largely be that Jesus wants us to discover who he is for ourselves. Let me demonstrate what I mean.

I know of a girl whose mother died when she was 10. When her mother died, her father said, "I've lost the only person I ever loved." In her pain, the girl turned her back on God. As a teenager, she took to the streets of Pittsburgh. She lived there two years. She became an addict, doing anything and everything to make it through the day. Then one day something told her to go to church. That first time in the church, she felt that she had been saved by God. She told the minister that she wanted to

work with the youth. But she was still an addict. The minister knew she wasn't ready to work with the youth. So he gave her a job dusting shelves. Five years later, she was clean and sober and working with the youth and operating a food pantry. She ended up going to seminary and writing books about the church. She's now an area minister for The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Mid-America. The Jesus Kris Tenny-Brittian knows is the Christ, but more than that, he's the Rescuer Christ--the One who rescued her. Jesus reached down and lifted her from the gutter and put her on her feet. For Kris, Jesus is indeed the rescuing Christ shown in the gospel story of Jesus rescuing his disciples when they were in the boat and the storm hit.

I also know of a woman named Toni who has four children. One of her children had sudden attacks that would make her precious child stop breathing. The child was diagnosed with a congenitally deformed heart. Doctors said that it was fixable--with lots of surgeries. A woman named Sharon heard about Toni's daughter because Sharon is in a prayer group at Toni's father's church. Sharon has struggles in her own life--she's bipolar. But the day before Toni's daughter's first scheduled surgery, Sharon stayed up and walked all night, praying for Ryan. The next morning, she told Toni's father, "I've been praying for your grandchild." He said, "That's nice," and she said, "No, I've really been praying. And God wants me to tell you that the baby's heart is perfect." When the doctors did their final tests before the surgery, indeed, the baby's heart was perfect! The Jesus Toni knows is the Christ, but more than that, he's the Healer Christ--the One who healed her beloved child. For Toni, Jesus is the healing Christ shown in the gospel story of Jesus healing Jairus' daughter.

I know of a woman who in her twenties found herself in a frightening situation, where she and she alone had to be in charge and care for a dying person, as well as his family. But she felt a Presence with her, giving her words and actions that provided what she, the dying man, and the family all needed. The Jesus I experienced so long and have continued to know is the Christ, but more than that, he's the Companion Christ--the One who walks with me. For me, Jesus is the Companion Christ shown in the gospel story of the two travelers on the Road to Emmaus.

Some cancer survivors have come to know Jesus as the Promise Keeper Christ. Others who have learned how to better live their lives from Jesus have come to know him as the Teacher Christ.

Until his personal encounter with God, Job's knowledge of God had been a theoretical one, based the reports of others. But, after his personal experience of God, Job recognized the former limitations of his understanding. He admitted to God, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:3, 5).

Paul Harvey once shared a discussion about the Bible. A woman in the group said, "I let the preacher read the Bible for me. He understands it so much better than I do." But another person in the group commented, "That's like buying second-hand clothes or being content with leftover food at a restaurant. Anyone who relies on the preacher to do his Bible reading for him will never have anything but a second-hand religion."

It's not enough to have second-hand knowledge of Jesus. It's not enough even to just know him on the pages of our Bibles. It's important to be alert and expectant of and sensitive to his past and present work in our lives--to know how he has been and is our personal Savior. It's important for each of us to be able, based Jesus' saving work in our individual lives, to give our own answer to his question of who he is--for us. British scholar W. H. Griffith Thomas wrote, "The testimony to the present work of Jesus Christ is no less real today than it has been in the past."

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-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; October 18, 2009