

Sermon “Who is Jesus?” Readings Proverbs 1: 20-33; Mark 8: 27-38 Sept. 13, 2009 (Rally Sunday), Rev. Dr. Thomas L. Hall, Salem UCC, Denver, CO 80222

We just learned that our Sunday School will be learning and growing in awareness of the people who followed Jesus, men and women, children and youth. All of them must have had some impressions of who Jesus was. The disciples spent three years with Jesus and the New Testament contains numerous stories of people who came into contact with him. People like the rich man, Zacheus, the little boy who brought the loaves and fishes, Mary, Martha, the Centurion, the man with the withered hand all had contact with this man, Jesus; all had some kind of relationship. Our children will come to know the people around Jesus and indirectly come to know Jesus, and because of knowing Jesus, come to know God.

Jesus never pointed to himself. He never claimed to be the Son of God. He did say, Son of Man. He always pointed out and away to his God and creator.

In our scriptures this morning, the writer of Proverbs portrays holy Wisdom as a prophetess-teacher whose teaching, whose knowledge, has been rejected. It calls upon all of us to listen carefully for the wisdom of God, no matter from whom it comes (Proverbs 1:23-25).

In Mark 8:27-38 we heard the story of Peter recognizing and confessing Jesus as the Messiah. Lots of questions can be raised in this story, like Why, after being revealed as the Messiah, does Jesus call for silence about himself (Mark 8:29-30)? Is this an occasion of being in the closet? Perhaps he does not want his disciples to be distracted by a premature vision of messianic victory. When Jesus describes suffering as a necessary part of his calling, Peter rejects Jesus’ claim (Mark 8:32-33). Why does Jesus rebukes him? Jesus’ teaching here emphasizes that living with integrity often involves suffering, but that suffering ends in the true victory of resurrection.

While we may have many questions, the one question all people must wrestle with is “Who is this man, Jesus? All of us have been indoctrinated with the traditional response of the church: Jesus is the Christ. He is the Messiah. He is my Lord and Savior. Now we have to ask what is meant by those nouns, of Christ, Messiah, Lord, Savior.

For most of us, we have come to think that the central issue of the Christian life is about believing in Jesus. I’m here to tell you, that it is not! Belief did not originally mean believing a set of doctrines or teachings. The root meaning is “to give one’s heart to.” Believing in Jesus does not mean believing doctrines about him. It means to give one’s heart, one self to Jesus. It is having a relationship with the Spirit of Christ, who is Jesus in the present, not the past. The Christian life is not about believing in God, or believing in the Bible or believing in the Christian tradition. The Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoke of as God, the risen living Christ, or the Spirit.

That relationship involves a journey, which is a journey of wholeness, of transformation. It is the story of the Bible as well.

There are three main themes in the Bible according to Marcus Borg in his book, “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time.”

The first theme is seen in the Exodus story which helps form the Hebrew community. On its own, it is about the liberation of the Hebrews. This story is about bondage, liberation, a journey

and a destination. While this story is about the Hebrews it is also about us living today. We also are living in Egypt, the land of bondage. The story invites us to ask: To what am I in bondage, and to what are we in bondage.

The way out involves a journey through the wilderness which becomes a place of freedom, where God is encountered and known. Yet it is also a place of fear and anxiety, a place where we can find ourselves longing for the security of Egypt and bondage. The Exodus story becomes a story of the human condition. The Exodus provides images of the religious life as a journey from the life of bondage to life in the presence of God.

The second theme is that of Exile. Again, it is ground in the story of the Hebrews. The Exile began when Jerusalem was conquered in 487 BC by the Babylonians and the survivors were taken to Babylon where they lived as refugees, apart from their homeland and under oppression. It ended some 50 years later when Babylonia itself was conquered by the Persians who allowed the Hebrews to return to their homeland.

This story is a metaphor for the Hebrews relationship with God. To us it is saying: What is life in exile like? Exile is a separation from all that is familiar and dear; it involves being powerless, victimized, oppressed. It has psychological as well as cultural and political dimensions. It involves feelings of separation, of a longing for home. Remember the movie E.T. where the words "Call home" were often used. Hymns often speak of this longing: Come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home."

The solution of exile is of course a journey of return. The words: "in the wilderness prepare the way of God, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" presents an image of return, a highway being built in the wildernesses, leading from Babylon back to the promised land, back home.

This is also a journey story to a place where God is present, a homecoming, and a journey of return. Read the story of the Prodigal Son again, and notice the images of return, homecoming, home.

The third theme is grounded in the religious institution of the Hebrews, writes Marcus Borg. The temple, priesthood and sacrifice are seen in the one who makes us right with God by offering sacrifice on our behalf. This story is about sin, guilt, sacrifice and forgiveness. We are people who have broken God's laws and who stand guilty. In this story, the religious life is not one of a journey, but a story of sin, guilt and forgiveness.

All three of these theme and stories shaped the message of Jesus, the New Testament and Christian thinking. Yet the Priestly theme and story of sin, guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation has dominated. These images shape who we are, our image of Jesus and of what God requires and therefore of the Christian life.

These are three ways of understanding the Christian life. Exodus, Exile, and the Priestly. They are stories of suffering and of being disconnected with God.

All make affirmations about us and about God, who is intimately involved with human life.

There is a power that wills our liberation
a light shining that invites us home,

a compassionate presence that accepts us just as we are, though we may not yet know or understand it.

All are stories of hope.

God does not will our present condition, but wills something quite different.

All speak of new beginnings:

the exodus story speaks of liberation from victimization and bondage,

the exile story speaks of coming home, and

the priestly story affirms that our own past is not the final word about us.

Finally, all of them are about stories of movement, of a journey.

All speak of a deepening and transforming relationship with God.

In the Tuesday “conversations” it was noted that the early Christians were known as “people of the way.” Which of these three ways speaks to you? Exodus, Exile, Priestly?

We asked ourselves how do we see Jesus? Lillian Martin referred to “Jesus as a friend, a companion, a mentor. He is someone I can go to. I can pray and he listens.”

This is a powerful image that is part of all three themes of Jesus.

Pat Freiburghaus shared that “Jesus is the personification of God’s plan for the world.” What a powerful image! This too is part of all three, a sign of hope that God is constantly with us.

Just as our children will be learning about the early disciples, we too are learning that discipleship can be costly.

Discipleship means being on the road with Jesus and listening to his teachings, sometimes understanding it, something not quite getting it, sometimes denying and even betraying him.

Discipleship means becoming like Jesus. It means being transformed just as God transformed Jesus.

So who is Jesus? He is a teacher, a spirit leader, one who possesses wisdom, a compassionate one.

So who is Jesus to you?

Where are you in relation to being on the road with Jesus?

Are you aware that in Jesus, in and through this church, God is reaching out and touching you, saying, “You are my child, and I love you.”

It is this deepening and transforming relationship with God that we will learn more of as seen in the life of Jesus next Sunday, as Jesus is Caring.

(Rev. Hall is appreciative for the three themes presented by Marcus Borg in his book, “Meeting Jesus Again, for the First Time.” Many of the thoughts and images used here are from this book.)