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Luke 5:1-155

Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism: Knowing Jesus and Following Jesus

So far in this sermon series we've looked at what the Bible says about Creation and whether it's compatible with Evolution; Adam and Eve and original sin; the role of women; and how to witness to our faith in a pluralistic nation. But today we come to the heart of the matter, and that is Jesus Christ. What does the Bible have to say about Jesus?

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 of birth, family origin, perhaps socioeconomic status and childhood influences, maybe their education or achievements, and some juicy tidbits about their 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 untrue or considered spin, at least not 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 to support the author's thesis. And because of this the Gospel writers -- 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 – because of this they pulled together different stories or highlighted certain character traits of Jesus' to prove their points. And sometimes, there may even have been room to include fiction. Which may sound a little blasphemous 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 that somehow Jesus was extraordinary, and that just like Mary proclaims, nothing is impossible with God; or we believe the truth of the resurrection, not because we can scientifically prove Jesus rose from the dead or someone claims to have found

pieces of cloth that may have been his burial clothes, but because we trust that somehow, some way, life triumphs over death and hope bats last.

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, and 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 b/c Jesus wants it to be a secret that he's the Son of God, because he's not the Son of God people were 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 chapter 1 is traced back to Abraham.

Luke 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, and he highlights the role of women. 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. 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 Jesus, or you're not.

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

But I'm going to assume that you're here this morning for a reason deeper than just learning about Jesus. You can pick up any book from the bookstore or library and learn about Jesus and acquire all sorts of knowledge about him, including what I just told you.

I'm going to assume you're here because there's something compelling about Jesus that bids you to come on Sundays at 11:00 when you could find a million other things to do with your time.

"Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." That's what Simon says to Jesus, a man whom he has never personally met but finds something compelling enough in to let down his nets. As Luke describes the scene in this week's Gospel, it's early morning, and Simon Peter is cleaning his fishing nets after a miserable night out on the lake. He and his partners have worn themselves out, casting nets from dusk till dawn into the dark water. As the sun rises, they have nothing to show for their efforts but sore muscles and weary hearts; their nets are empty.

Just then, Jesus shows up, steps into Simon's boat, and tells his would-be disciple to "put out into the deep water." In other words, to do the same old same old one more time, with no guarantee that he'll see better results. Simon protests: "Master, we have worked all night long." But then he obeys: "Yet if you say so, I will." And what happens when he does go back out to try one more time? Simon has the catch of his life.

While there are some preachers who would use this story as a sign to thump the Bible over people's heads in the hopes of catching as many people as possible for Christ, for me it's much more than that. After all, who wants to be caught and

filleted? For me, this is a story about following Jesus even though we don't have all knowledge about Jesus.

Simon agreed to go out one more time with Jesus not b/c he knew everything about him or understood all of the details of their encounter, but because he trusts – because he's willing to trust – and follow Jesus and learn more about him. Can the same thing not be said about us? Do we follow because we have verified every fact about Jesus? Certainly not. If we waited for that, we'd wait forever. As New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer says: faith "does not come as assent to statements previously preached, but as trust in Jesus' call to try once more, contrary to all dictates of reason."

Reason told Simon to stay on shore, but faith prompted him to go out one more time. And isn't that a part and parcel of faith? That Jesus meets us where we are, even in the midst of a long night when nothing has gone our way and we wake up worn out and still tired? Simon had just spent countless hours pouring his heart and soul into his job only to fall short; who among us hasn't faced the same thing, whether that's in a job or a relationship, an endeavor or a dream? We wonder why we spent all that effort for nothing . . . and it's precisely at that moment of despair and frustration that God shows up. And doesn't just show up, but gets in the boat with us and stays by our side.

Friends, the truth is that no matter how much knowledge we acquire about God, our journeys with God and with faith can still be fraught: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." There's a big gap in those statements, and it's there for a reason. Sometimes we live suspended between weariness and hope, defeat and faith, resignation and obedience. Though we're often reluctant to admit it life can be a grind. Even the most earnest and hardworking of us can land up on shore some mornings with empty, stinking fishing nets tangled in our fingers, wondering what went wrong. But when we do, Jesus is there to meet us.

And as for whether or not Simon actually caught all those fish, does it really matter? The historical fact of whether he did or didn't isn't important. What is important is the abundance to which this story points. How amazing is it that even a seasoned fisherman like Simon Peter finds the catch overwhelming? This is extravagant, excessive, bountiful generosity. Food for all, food security for all,

justice for all, nurture for all. In this image of plenitude, Jesus shows Simon what God's kingdom will look like when it's fully established. God's kingdom will suffer no empty nets and no empty tables. God's kingdom will mean good news for all. That's the point.

Friends, at the end of the day, most of us put Jesus at the center of our lives not because we have everything figured out, but because like Simon we've experienced the grace of God – the abundant, overflowing grace of God – and in the face of it can only muster a “yes”. We've met God in the midst of or at the end of a long night and felt God's love envelope us and hold us up like nothing else can. We've met God in the midst of the same old, same old of our lives into which something miraculous occurs – love found, a relationship restored, a dream realized, an endeavor made actual, a job accomplished.

That's why we put Jesus at the center of our lives. Rarely does one put God at the center because one has everything figured out, all of his or her theological beliefs nailed down neat and tidy.

Novelist Frederick Buechner put it this way: "All-wise. All-powerful. All-loving. All knowing. We bore to death both God and ourselves with our chatter. God cannot be expressed but only experienced. In the last analysis, you cannot pontificate but only point. A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, - but there's something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me.'" (Wishful Thinking-A Theological ABC

The truth of this story, and the welcome relief of this story, is that most of what we may come to understand about God can only be understood by following God.

In the end, you need to be willing to trust in a God you cannot see and whose ways you don't entirely understand. You need to be able to suspend a little disbelief in order to believe. Sometimes the head needs to give way to the heart. And sometimes, just like the disciples, we need to be willing to leave the shoreline and follow even when we don't have it all figured out.

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.

Sources:

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Feasting on the Word, commentary on Luke 5:1-11

Journey with Jesus, essay by Debie Thomas, February 3, 2019