

"Wonder Out Loud--The Big Question"

Today we're wrapping up this series called "Wonder Out Loud." We've been looking at questions that lots of us have but might be afraid to ask. But we can ask them because God's not offended or angered by our questions. This church is a safe place to ask and seek. In fact in this church on any given Sunday there are probably 100 or 150 people who would say, "I'm not quite a Christian yet, but I'm on my way."

Today we come the most important question. **Who is Jesus Christ?** That's the big question. Who is this man? Now, a lot of you have asked questions **about** Jesus Christ and I want to start by addressing some of those today. Some of you have asked questions like, "How could Jesus really be the son of God? And do we really need to believe that? Couldn't we just believe that he was a good teacher and just stop there?" Some of you have said, "You know it's intellectually difficult for me to wrestle with the question of the resurrection of Jesus. I don't understand that. I'm not sure I can believe that." Some of you have said that you struggle with the concept of the virgin birth. Some of you have said that you don't know about the miracles of Jesus. Some of you have wanted to know if Jesus' death on the cross could do anything for you. Or how this man, after 2,000 years, could still affect you. These are all really good questions.

But before we can really answer those questions we got to address a problem: What people throughout history have done with Jesus, and still do today, is to try to shape him into their own image. A lot of us do this whether we realize it or not. We want a Jesus who looks, and thinks, and acts a lot like us. Every once in a while I'll watch some TV preachers late at night. Some of them are really good, but then there are others who preach a Jesus that I just don't recognize. They talk about a Jesus who seems judgmental, and angry, and eager to throw sinners into hell. I listen to these preachers and I think, "Are you reading the same Bible I read?!" As they preach Jesus begins to look a lot like that particular preacher.

It's easy to do. People on the far right make Jesus out to be fundamentalist who's a card-carrying member of the NRA. People on the far left do the same thing. Except they make Jesus out to be vegetarian, card-carrying member of the ACLU. We tend to put Jesus in the slot that we want him to be. And we want Jesus to look like us and to support our beliefs...and sometimes we forget to listen to what Jesus has to say about himself. That's why you and I have to read the book to get a glimpse of what Jesus said and did and what people saw in him.

I wonder, sometimes, if Jesus walked among us today, if we would even recognize him, if we would like him, or if we would just reject him like lots of religious people did in his time. So who was he?! And more importantly, what do you do with him? Let's dig into some of your questions.

Some of you have asked how we could believe in Jesus when there is so little historical evidence for the person of Jesus. But if you study historical evidence you find that there's more evidence for Jesus as a historical figure than almost any other historical figure prior to 1700—both inside the Bible and outside the Bible. To say that the historical evidence isn't there is not really an accurate statement.

Others of you have asked about the virgin birth saying that you don't really understand it and don't really want to buy into that. People have asked me if I believe that. I consider myself a somewhat reasonable person, and I believe that it happened. For me, I ask myself, "OK, if I were God and wanted to come into the world, what would be the best way to do that?"

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the great scientist, once said that the best way to communicate a great idea is to wrap it in a person. He was right in science, but he was also right in theology. God came among us. Many of you ask, "Why doesn't God just show himself to us so that we can see him?" The answer is that he did. He did in this man Jesus and the Gospels testify to that.

But how would he come in to the world? Is it possible that he would choose a peasant girl; a poor woman in a remote part of the world? And that God would choose to enter the world through her? And what does it say that God chose to be born into a poor working-class family? What does that say about God's character? Is it possible that God would choose to be born as a baby? And that God would actually crawl? And then walk? And then run? And that he would experience existence just like you do? I believe it is because it is in keeping with the character of God.

Do you have to believe that in order to be a follower of Jesus? No. Jesus never required anyone to believe that he was born of a virgin. But, listen, I believe that as you follow him, and see God revealed in him, you will see how believable that is.

Some people have difficulty with the miracles Jesus did. Some want to do what Thomas Jefferson did. He cut and pasted together a version of the New Testament that kept Jesus' teachings in, but cut out all the miracle stories. For me, I ask the question, if God walked among us and he saw people who were sick what would you expect him to do? To just walk right by, because people aren't supposed to do miracles? Or do you think that God might, out of his compassion, actually reach out and touch the eyes of the blind and heal them? And would that be any big thing for God to do? When he saw someone who was paralyzed, would he just walk by, or would he reach down and lift them up? Would he try to ease the suffering of the people, or just ignore it?

You see, when we look at these things and we understand who Jesus is, suddenly those miracles not only make sense, they are imperative of Jesus. I would wonder about Jesus if he hadn't cared about those who were sick and healed them.

People I know and love struggle with the miracle stories. Some ask, "Do I have to believe them to be a Christian?" The interesting thing is that Jesus never said that anybody had to believe in miracles in order to follow him. In fact, as you read the Gospels you see over and over again Jesus telling people that he'd healed to keep it a secret. As if he knew that people telling about the miracles would cause all kinds of trouble.

Actually, very few people believe in God because they believe in miracles first. But a lot of people believe in miracles because first, they believe in God. It's like, "Yes, I believe that God is loving, and compassionate, and cares about people and the pain they suffer. So what else would God in human form do? He'd heal."

Some people say, "Well, what about the resurrection?" First, let's talk about the cross for a minute. How would God experience being human to its fullest? What would it be like if God, in the form of Jesus, didn't die and just said, "It's been nice being with you, sorry you have to face death, but the neat thing about being God is that I can just bypass it!" But that's not what he did. Instead he faced everything just like we do. He faced death at the hands of unjust people—a death that was painful and difficult. He knew the fear that was involved in facing death just like we do.

And how would God deal with the sins of human existence? How would God deal with our guilt—the guilt of billions of people? What would God have to do to communicate to them that they were forgiven? How would God deal with the punishment and the justice issues?

This is how God did it . . . on a cross . . . saying, "Everything that you have ever done has been laid on that cross and you are forgiven and you are free." He showed us the fullest extent of his love.

You know, sometimes I don't understand the cross very well. Sometimes I wonder how Jesus' death could be for me . . . until I do something really wrong and I feel extremely guilty and suddenly the cross makes perfect sense to me. And suddenly I understand what it means to be free and what it means for Christ to die for me and why I needed that.

Now, once Christ died, how would you expect God to deal with that? Would he just die and that would be the end? Hopeless disciples left feeling like there would never be any hope? Or would God do something else? . . . Three days later the stone was rolled away. He was dead, then he was alive.

Listen, there were at least a dozen other movements not long before and after the time of Jesus. Movements that were led by charismatic leaders who announced they could lead the people out of bondage to Rome. But in every case, the death of that leader was the death of their movement. Why didn't that happen with Jesus? Because his disciples believed without a doubt that he was dead one day, and alive the next. The Jesus movement was a success because Jesus was alive.

The disciples and over 500 other people saw Jesus alive after he had been crucified. They talked to him, touched him, ate with him. Those disciples were left changed by the experience of meeting Christ after he had risen from the grave. And they went into all the world and they preached and every one of them, except

John, died an early death, a martyr's death, going to his grave preaching that Jesus was risen. And they faced death without fear because they saw the risen Lord. They knew that death was not the end. They were unstoppable because they saw Jesus alive and in him they found life.

For some people that's still too much of a mind-bender. If that's you I would say, "Become a follower of Jesus first, give your life to living out a relationship with him, belief in the resurrection will come later."

As I always say, don't take my word for it. Read the book for yourself. If you do you'll see in story after story who Jesus claimed to be and who his followers saw him and experienced him to be . . . and who he can be for you.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke there is a very important scene that I want to end with. Jesus has spent almost 3 years with his disciples. They've seen his compassion, they've listened to his teaching, they've witnessed the miracles, they've seen him conflict with the religious leaders. One day he turns to the disciples and says, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They said, "Well, some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say one of the prophets risen from the grave." Who do people say that he is today? A conservative. A liberal. A popular icon.

Then Jesus asked the really key question. This is the most important question. He looked at them and said, "**But who do you say that I am?**" And I want you to hear, echoing over these 2,000 years, that question. Because he's asking it of you today.

C. S. Lewis said that when you see what Jesus did and said in the Gospels you have three choices: You can say he was a lunatic and had these delusions of grandeur—he thought he was God but wasn't. Or you can say he was evil and wanted to deceive people for some sick reason. Or you have to say he was who he claimed to be—God in human form.

Some theologians give a fourth option and say that Jesus was not a lunatic, not evil, not God in human form. They say he was a good man, a godly teacher, a wise sage, who just wanted the best for all humanity.

Who do you say that he is? Every one of us comes to a point where we have to make a decision. You have to decide, was he a lunatic, was he evil and trying to deceive people, was he just a good teacher who wanted people to get along? Or was he who he said he was, God in human form, one with the Father, to see him was to see the Father.

To be a Christian is to be one who answers that question and says, "Jesus is Savior and Lord for me. And I choose to take up my cross and follow him. I choose to make that decision every day to follow him."

Some of you have asked me, "How do I know that I'm a Christian?" Well, you know that you are a Christian because you've experienced Jesus' invitation to come follow him and you've said "yes." And every day, in your own way, you say, "Today, I choose to be your follower all over again. I'll do my best to live my life your way." It doesn't mean that you're perfect. It doesn't mean you won't face temptation. It doesn't mean life will be easy. It means that daily you decide to follow him. You strive to make your decisions in partnership with him. You daily try to live with the same sort of compassion he had, the same sort of love, the same sort of tenacity.

To be a follower of Christ means to live a life of integrity. Integrity. That's worth talking a little bit about. Because, you see, we have the remarkable ability to compartmentalize our lives, to keep things separate that should actually rub up against each other. It's the classic story of the guy who goes to church on Sunday morning. He loves God, and loves humanity, and loves God's creation. But on Monday morning he has no trouble with his company's policy of dumping toxic waste in the local stream. He can do that because he's put his religion in one compartment and his business in another. It's a comfortable way to operate—but that is not integrity. The word integrity comes from the same root as integrate. It means to achieve wholeness—that's the opposite of compartmentalizing. Compartmentalizing is easy. Integrity can be painful, but without it there can be no wholeness. (from Scott Peck).

Some people struggle with Jesus, not because of the virgin birth, or the miracles, or the resurrection. But because he made this radical call for people to integrate their lives. He made this radical call to follow him, to be in a relationship with him, and then allow their relationship with him influence and affect every other part of their lives. How they see people, how they treat people, how they use their time, how they use their money.

That can be kind of daunting, but we begin where we are. Some of us have already chosen to follow Jesus, but we still compartmentalize. Don't be discouraged. It's lifetime journey. We allow Jesus to work in us over the long haul, and over time we allow him into every area of our lives.

Some of us haven't really accepted the invitation yet. Ultimately that's why we've been doing this series, asking questions, wrestling with answers, so maybe if your questions are roadblocks, those roadblocks have come down.

Some of us haven't really decided to be a follower because it feels a little scary. Sometimes that moment when we are thinking about becoming a Christian feels like standing on the high dive. You remember what that was like standing on the high dive at the swimming pool as a kid? You're standing up there and the wind is blowing and you're looking down and seems like you are a hundred feet in the air on even though it's just 10 feet. And as you stand there you remember the times off the low board when you did a belly flop and it hurt. And you think that the high dive is going to hurt way too much. Or you wonder if the water is too cold. And you're too afraid. And your friends are down in the water and they're treading water and they're saying, "Jump! Jump! The water's not cold! It feels good! It's O.K! You're gonna' to have a great time! Jump!"

Some of you are standing on the diving board . . . "Should I be a Christian? Shouldn't I be a Christian? Should I? Shouldn't I? Do I want to? Can I? What does it mean? What will it cost me? What will happen?" And I'm here every week treading water, along with some of the rest of us, and we're saying, "Jump! Jump! You're gonna' love it!" But you've got to decide. Will you take that leap of faith into the water and say "yes" . . . and trust . . . and follow. There comes a point at which you have to decide. What will you do with Jesus Christ? Who do you say he is and what will you do? That's the biggest question of all. I say, jump in. And for today, that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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