

Ten Questions Series
Who Is Jesus? May 2, 2010

We come to our fourth question in this sermon series, “Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith,” based on Brian McLaren’s book, *A New Kind of Christianity*. And the question today is: Who is Jesus? If I just have you picture Jesus, what is the image that comes to mind? Some of us grew up with the Warner Sallman picture of Jesus. He doesn’t look very Jewish, in fact he looks quite European, but that is the image some of us have in our heads when we think of Jesus. Several years ago an artist came up with this rendition of Jesus, thinking this might be a more accurate Jewish rendition of what Jesus might have looked like.

But what’s more important than what he looked like is who he was, what was he about, what was his mission. One of Brian McLaren’s critics was talking about him several years ago, and he described McLaren and people like him as wanting to “recast Jesus as a limp-wrist hippie in a dress with a lot of product in his hair, who drank decaf and made pithy Zen statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes.”

And then the speaker went on to describe the Jesus he could believe in: “In Revelation, Jesus is a prize-fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in His hand, and a commitment to make someone bleed. That is the guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.” (quoted from *A New Kind of Christianity*, p. 120)

Christians has been tempted throughout the centuries to remake Jesus into anything we like- Annie Lamott once said that we want Jesus to hate the people we hate and like the things we like. We want to be comfortable with Jesus. So throughout the years we’ve had the Republican or Democrat Jesus, the white supremacist Jesus, the capitalist or communist Jesus, the slave-owning Jesus, the nuclear-bomb dropping Jesus, the organ music stained glass window sentimental Jesus, the prosperity gospel get rich quick Jesus, the Joe Six-Pack Jesus, the anti-Muslim crusader Jesus, to name a few.

We heard from the Revelation of John this morning, and it describes the warrior-
Jesus. Here it is again: “Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges

and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords." (Rev. 19:11-16) Seems like a rather war- like image, doesn't it?

You know I always invite you to look at the context of a biblical passage, and what kind of material it is. Is it a letter? A gospel? And in this case, we have something called apocalyptic literature. It was very common two or three centuries before and after Jesus. It was a kind of science fiction material for its day. Apocalyptic literature used code language and numbers as symbols. And it was often used by writers when their people were undergoing persecution. It was used to say that God is the one ultimately in control, not whatever government was persecuting you at the time.

The book of Revelation worked like some of our science fiction works today. A Star Trek episode, or one of the Matrix movies, isn't necessarily saying this is what the future will look like. It more often takes issues that we are concerned about today, and helps us work through them so we can reshape the future. Good science fiction helps us look at racism and environmental concerns and warfare so that we can, with God's help, change the future. It's not saying, This is what the future will necessarily look like, but it's a window into the future, helping us to choose wisely.

That's what I believe Revelation does. It helped the early Christians deal with the present. The Christians John is writing to are under the control of one of the Roman emperors, either Nero or Domitian, both of whom persecuting the early Christians for calling Jesus Lord, for not bowing down to the emperor. So they need a message of hope. And do they need a message that says they can forget all that peace and forgiveness stuff Jesus taught, because soon Jesus will come back and they'll be able to pull out their swords and destroy their enemies? Or do they need the message that Jesus' way of peacemaking will prevail, it is the right way, and they shouldn't give up on it?

That passage from Revelation can be interpreted either way. So who is Jesus in Revelation? Is he a prize-fighter with a commitment to making somebody bleed? Will he come back again like an emperor, using the violent means of the empire to accomplish God's will?

Let me give you another interpretation. This image can also be a reassuring one for these Christians, that the Jesus they remembered coming into Jerusalem peacefully on a donkey wasn't showing that he was weak and defeated, but that his way is even more powerful than a Caesar on a warhorse. Notice in the passage that the sword comes out of his *mouth*: it isn't being held in his hand. The word coming out of his mouth is a message of peace and reconciliation, that will ultimately be more powerful than the sword.

And the blood on his robe is not the blood of his enemies. It's his own blood, because Revelation shows Jesus as the lamb who has been slain. That's what we sing in our hymn of praise: *Worthy is the lamb who was slain; his blood set us free to be people of God*. So Revelation isn't a book showing that Jesus has changed his mind. He tells Pilate at his trial that if his kingdom were of this world, then his disciples would be fighting to keep him from being handed over. He hasn't changed his mind in Revelation. He hasn't abandoned the way of peace and concluded that the way of Pilate is better. He hasn't given up on loving his enemies. He hasn't sold the donkey to purchase warhorses, chariots, tanks, and B-1s. He hasn't decided that a tattoo down his leg is better than scars on his hands and feet and side. He isn't the one who will exact revenge at the end of time: he is the one who whispers from the cross, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." So who is Jesus? I would say along with McLaren, that the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and the Acts of the Apostles and the letters, does not change into a violent conquering hero in the book of Revelation. Again, in this library of materials that is the Bible, we need to lay that image of Jesus in the Gospels over against the view that he would turn into violent king that the Caesars would be proud of. We need to lay the Jesus of the Gospels over against the Jesus of the Revelation of John.

Let's ask one more question about Jesus today. Brian McLaren had another critic who said this about Jesus: "The only reason Jesus came was to save people from hell...Jesus had no social agenda...He didn't come to eliminate poverty or slavery or fix something in somebody's life for the little moment they live on this earth." (McLaren, p. 127)

Going back to the first sermon in this series, you remember the six-line narrative that we often lay on the Bible: creation...fall...condemnation...salvation...heaven....and hell. Sometimes Jesus is explained simply as the Savior who dies for us, and what is of utmost importance is that we believe that and receive him so that we can go to heaven. This life doesn't really matter all that much, because we're going to live forever afterwards.

But that's not the Jesus of the Gospels! Look again at the mission statement that Jesus gives when he shows up in his hometown at the beginning of his ministry in Luke's Gospel. He quotes from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-19, 21)

McLaren has a really helpful way to see three themes that are in the Hebrew Bible that get played out in Jesus' life: Genesis emphasizes creation and reconciliation; the Exodus story is about liberation and formation; and the Isaiah story is about a new creation and the peace-making kingdom. So how do we read and interpret the life of Jesus through those three lenses?

Who is Jesus in terms of those three emphases? What about creation and reconciliation? Genesis starts, In the beginning God created.... (Gen.1:1). And how does John's Gospel start? In the beginning was the Word.... (John 1:1). John is reminding us of creation, how God got everything started, and John is saying, In the beginning this Word that is Jesus was there. And now God is doing a new creation in Jesus! Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17: In Christ you are a new creation! God is doing something new in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus! And remember that in the first chapter of John, John says the true light was coming into the world. Remember that in Genesis, the first thing that God creates is light: Let there be light! (Gen.1:3) Jesus is now the light of the world. Look at the way the Genesis story of creation is fulfilled in Jesus!

The creative God of Genesis is the creative, life-giving God that we know in Jesus! John's Gospel ends at daybreak, in the garden where the tomb is. It's a sign of a new beginning, a new creation, back to the garden. In fact, Mary

misidentifies Jesus as the gardener. Creation gets a new start in the resurrection of Jesus!

The other theme in Genesis is reconciliation. You remember at the end of Genesis, Joseph is reconciled to his brothers, who had sold him into slavery. Joseph says, You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. And at the end of John's Gospel, there is reconciliation. The disciples wondered when they met Jesus after the resurrection, Will he be angry with us? But no, Jesus offers them breakfast by the lakeside. And Jesus says to Peter, Do you love me? I still love you, and I have a job for you. Feed my sheep! God is reconciling a family at the end of Genesis, and God is reconciling a family of followers at the end of John's Gospel. That's who Jesus is: he's the one who brings new life and restored relationships and a vision for a new creation

Who is Jesus in terms of the Exodus themes of liberation and formation? Moses led the people of God out of slavery in Egypt in their day. Jesus led people out of slavery to sickness and demonic oppression in his day. Moses gave the law...Jesus is the new Moses who is the Word made flesh. In Exodus, God's presence was associated with the tabernacle, the moving tent where God met Moses. John's Gospel says that the Word "tabernacled" with us in the presence of Jesus. We discover who God is in him!

When Moses asked for God's name, God said, I am who I am (Ex. 3:14). Jesus says in John's Gospel: Before Abraham was, I am (John 8:58). In John's Gospel he says, I am...the door...I am...the vine...I am... the good shepherd...I am...the light of the world. And every time we hear, I am, we think back to God saying to Moses, I am who I am. Who is Jesus? He reveals to us most fully the "I am", the God who was revealed to Moses. A Passover lamb is slain to save the people from the angel of death, and they are given their freedom. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the Lamb of God is killed and his death sets us free to live a new way. Jesus' life shows parallel after parallel with the theme of liberation in Exodus.

Who is Jesus according to the Isaiah story of the peacemaking kingdom? The Old Testament story starts with people longing for a new homeland: Abraham leaves Babylonia and heads for Canaan; Moses leads the people out of Egypt towards the Promised Land...the people in Babylon come back home...But then the prophets, especially Isaiah, speak of the Promised Land less in terms of geography and more in terms of a social reality: the land of

milk and honey becomes a society where justice flows like water, where there is harmony, and enough for all and safety for all. And that peaceable image is not just meant to be a picture of heaven. That is an image that we can hold up as a vision for this world. Remember Jesus' mission statement: he was concerned about the poor, the captives, the oppressed. And that's part of our mission as followers of Jesus. So who is Jesus? Is he simply the One who saves us from hell? I'll talk about heaven and hell a little later in this series, but even if he does that, he obviously is so much more than that: he's the one creating new life in us now; he's the one showing us how to reconcile with our enemies; he's the one giving us a vision of life in community. Next week we'll ask the question: What is the Gospel?