

**"The Way of Jesus: The Quest for Truth"**  
**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**  
**Sunday, August 1, 2021**  
**Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**

Traditional Word

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" 28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." 30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. – Mark 8:27-30

Contemporary Word

"He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

— Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*

"The Way of Jesus: The Quest for Truth"

Today we finally enter modernity! Do you feel up-to-date? Well, you should; we've spent the summer exploring the Way of Jesus from a different perspective: more objective and scientific than orthodox. And today, we finally bid the past adieu. Well, at least the distant past. We're going to begin to see what happens when the new thinking that we call the Enlightenment smashes against Christianity's orthodox and ancient precepts. Sparks are gonna fly! But we will eventually witness the birth of something new—something that we can trace our own congregational roots back to: reformation. The Protestant way is an interpretation of scripture that creates space for something new: differing opinions on the character and make-up of the Divine One. This is huge—until the reformation, speculation on God's being was considered something for the church and clergy to work out and then tell you how to behave and to be in the world. The Enlightenment and the Reformation will rock the world because look out, world, here comes the future! And as we know, the changes that are coming are going to be mind-blowing. Everything is going to be reassessed and re-formed. As Diana Butler Bass reminds us: "Since the Reformation

Protestants and Catholics had been reassessing Christian thought and practice in the modern world, trying to make sense of ancient ideas in the challenging new social, economic, and intellectual environments in Europe and the Americas" (213). And these big topics came up again and again: what is the meaning of life and what is our place in the world?

The questions had been curated, and the answers sustained by the institutional Church (capital C) ever since Constantine saw that image of the cross in a cloud of smoke in a dream he had. The Church had answers for you; all you had to do was trust and believe. In fact, the Church STILL has answers for you. It's just that those answers aren't as satisfying to accept any more. At least not for me, and probably not for you.

What the Enlightenment gave us was space to pursue those questions as we each saw fit. We began to explore other ways to believe. Other ways to be in the world. Other ways to approach knowledge. We created space for differing interpretations of scripture, where before, by design, there was only one interpretation and one accepted understanding of the Christ event. Christianity (or the Way of Jesus) will begin to turn towards the Quest for Truth.

Now, there are plenty of people today who will say to you: Why do you seek the Way of Jesus when all of the work has been done? All you have to do is trust and believe and not worry about all of that other stuff. I don't know about you, but for me, there's an awful lot of unanswered, or even misunderstood, questions in "all of that other stuff." I need a more holistic approach to the interpretation of scripture. I require a different lens with which to see and know the Christ Event. I want to get as close as possible to understanding what Jesus wants for us—even at the risk of offending the official church.

Because that's what Protestantism is about—we are "protesting" the established church and its understanding of God. And then, did you see what happened? All of us protestants started fighting because, once you let the cat out of the bag, it's had to get back in there. These universal truths that we seek an understanding of are not so easily answered anymore. And sometimes, the answer is unsettling—it disturbs us to understand that we are responsible for our poor neighbor. It disturbs us to hear that perhaps we don't know all we think we know. It disturbs us when someone "uppity" person, who doesn't know their place, preaches to us to change. It disturbs us when we hear the Ancient eighth-century Jewish sages call us back into right relationship with the Holy One and with each other. It disturbs us, even frightens us, when our lives begin to change because of all of these disturbances.

"The early modern period was a time of intellectual, political, and social upheaval. It was a time of optimistic possibilities, revolutionary change, and economic possibilities and social visionaries believed they could solve all the

world's problems." (215) Modern Christians reworked their new theology. Now it's not centered on the supernatural aspects of the faith but instead refocused on morality rather than doctrine. Modern Christians celebrated tolerance. They raised our awareness of the natural world that we share with all of God's creation. They reformed how we thought about the relationship between humans and the Holy One.

The significant change that modernity will bring to the world is a quest for scientific and philosophical truth. And that quest will include a new way to look at the Jesus of history—there began a search for the historical Jesus—not the Christ as worshipped and taught about by the church, but the simple Jewish man who offered a radical new way to be in the world. As Albert Schweitzer wrote in his landmark book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*: "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

Schweitzer's book changed the world. Many of you have read this book, and it shook you—it disrupted your beliefs—it forced you to set aside your embedded understanding of Jesus the Christ and begin to seek a better understanding of Jesus, the man. Let's hear how Diana Butler Bass describes this in her book *"A People's History of Christianity"*:

"When Schweitzer's book appeared in 1906, it did seem to hit many Christians over the head. In it, Schweitzer argued that Jesus proclaimed the imminent Kingdom of God and that he had been sent to initiate God's messianic end-times reign. Jesus's message was intrinsically knit into this context, a context of Jewish thought and culture that we can no longer understand. Thus Jesus is a real person in history, but one whose contextual meaning can not be recovered. Schweitzer separated the historical Jesus from the "Christ of faith." He argued that the truth of Jesus cannot be found in history but is found rather in 'the present experience of Christ as a living spiritual reality.' Schweitzer's conclusions surprised many Christians, and *Quest* [his book] sparked controversy among theologians and churchgoers." (212-213)

Hints of the historical Jesus can be found in the bible, such as this verse from the eighth chapter of Mark where we get Jesus himself questioning this idea that HE was the Messiah: "27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" 28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter

answered, "You are the Messiah." 30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him." Why the secrecy?

Schweitzer goes on to tell us that many "modern versions of Christianity deliberately ignore the urgency of the message that Jesus proclaimed. Each new generation hopes to be the one to see the world destroyed, another world coming, and the saints governing a new earth. Schweitzer thus concludes that the First Century theology, originating in the lifetimes of those who first followed Jesus, is both incompatible and very different from those beliefs later made official by the Roman Emperor Constantine in AD 325."

Schweitzer forced us to look at the Christ event through a new lens—we had to refocus our vision and try and see what he was getting at: that there was more to our Christian belief than the Church was teaching. We could come at the Christ story on our own: without doctrine and dogma and fear.

We have a more modern counterpart in the Jesus Seminar, founded by Robert Funk in 1985 to continue the work Schweitzer and others began. What the Jesus Seminar discovered about the historical Jesus is very different than the one described by Albert Schweitzer. The Seminar's understanding of the historical Jesus portrayed him as an itinerant Hellenistic Jewish sage and faith-healer who preached a gospel of liberation from injustice using his famous and startling parables and sayings." They found him to be an iconoclast, breaking with well-established Jewish theological dogmas and social conventions in both his teachings and his behavior, often by turning common-sense ideas upside down, confounding the expectations of his audience: he preached of "Heaven's imperial rule" (traditionally translated as "Kingdom of God") as being already present but unseen; he depicts God as a loving father; he fraternizes with outsiders and criticizes insiders. Also, according to the Seminar, Jesus was a mortal man born of two human parents, who did not perform nature miracles nor die as a substitute for sinners nor rise bodily from the dead. Those sightings of a risen Jesus represented the wild visionary experiences of some of his disciples rather than physical encounters. While these claims have been repeatedly made in various forms since the 18th century, what was unique about the Jesus Seminar was how they did it: Their research methodology. Each member of the Seminar had to give clear reasons as to why they had come to their understanding of a specific passage. Then the entire Seminar would vote using a system of colored beans—it's fascinating, and if you would like to know more, contact me.

This past week, I helped lay to rest a 31-year old man who died recently under very tragic circumstances. When you work with people in their grief, you often learn that we don't think about life and death and theology and philosophy all that much. We generally think about these things at the significant milestones of life: childbirth, illness, death, achievement of some important goal. It is at these times that human thought generally turns to God. If we're being honest, we have

some big questions that are pretty similar to the big questions we asked in our youth: Who am I? What is my purpose in this world? What is all of this all about? What gives my journey meaning?

OK—so it appears that Christianity is a quest. It's a journey. It's a way to be in this world. To move through this thick life, to paraphrase a young poet. And if we use some of the metaphors that I've hopefully illuminated so far this summer, that quest is often seen as a return to Eden. We are trying to get back to God. If, as I believe, our spirits come from God upon our births, as in the ancient Jewish belief that each of us has a tiny fragment of God deep within us; then if that's true, then it follows that our spirit would yearn to return to God, which it does upon our death. I find great solace in that thought—and for me, it explains my spirit's response to God's presence. Our God fragment knows when it's in the presence of the Holy One and fills us with powerful, profound feelings of connection. This is why we belong to a church—this is why we belong to this church—because we recognize that God is in every human on the planet, and how we care for those humans is a direct reflection of how we care for God and God's world. How are you going to show the world God's presence in your life? How are you going to live the Way of Jesus in the coming week? How are you going to interpret the Gospel message of love and salvation for all and reconcile that within your own spirit? How will you be a progressive—nay, liberal--, life-giving Christian in the world today? I have a feeling you will do it with the knowledge that perhaps your purpose in life is to be fully present wherever the Holy One puts you—to do the work that we all know needs to be done. Maybe you have found the meaning of your life. Perhaps you are supposed to be God's hands in this world. That's more than enough meaning for me. To get to show the world how much I love God and neighbor. That would be a fine epitaph for any of us. Amen.

#### RESOURCES USED:

Holy Bible, NRSV

Diana Butler Bass. *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 2009.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Quest\\_of\\_the\\_Historical\\_Jesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Quest_of_the_Historical_Jesus)