

## The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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### *The Name of Jesus*

*Isaiah 52.13-53.3, 12; Philippians 2.1-11*

Russ Dean, August 31, 2008



I think it is a product of my age – even with an optimistic view of my future, I’ve probably “climbed to the top of the roller coaster,” as David Wilcox sings, and now I’m “[looking] down the other side!” – but I sometimes wonder these days, as I never have before, if I’ll be remembered when I’m gone. Oh, I guess two boys will remember the old man for while, but will anyone else? And, when they’re gone... will I be gone, too? Forever? Totally erased from the remembrance of history? I guess it’s not the most uplifting way to begin a sermon! I know the answer. Surely it’s one of the downsides of mid-life. And one of the reasons that concept is often associated with the word “crisis.”

It may be of some consolation, however, to note that very few among us will be known beyond the ken of family and dearest friends for very long. In fact, as human history tells it, it is the very few (the very, very few, indeed) who achieve such immortality. Even kings and presidents, a culture’s most famous and most spectacularly infamous, trend-setters and consensus breakers, the uncommonly wise and the wisely uncommon, celebrities and the famously wealthy... In every age, even those whose names define the moment, whose daring or dramatic lives seem unforgettable, even they go down to the same fate of oblivion as the nameless multitudes.

Few of the current household names of sometimes even global fame, will survive into the next century. The names Bill Gates and Bill Clinton, the initials JFK and MLK, the images of Osama and even Obama will disappear over time and will become buried farther and farther in the footnotes of even details histories of our histories.

But there is one who has defied the cruel and depersonalizing incinerator of history. There is hardly a place on earth where the name is not known. In every culture, to every people, rich and poor, scholarly and uneducated, sophisticated and common, religious and secular, the name of Jesus is remembered. And even among those who will not commit to his Way, his name is honored. I don't know that I have ever heard anyone disparage the person of Jesus, himself. His followers are often mocked, the religion that bears his title is often the target of derision – but this is too-often understandable – and it should cause us to wonder even more: if not for the show conducted by many of his so-called followers, if not for the sham which often passes for Christianity, what would his name mean for this world?

A recent Newsweek magazine article highlighted the place that Jesus has always held for the three great monotheistic religions. Despite years of the understandably reluctant praise of Jews and Muslims, this survey detailed some of the recent scholarship indicating a renewed interest on behalf of Jews on the Jewishness of Jesus, and of Muslims on the role of Jesus as a prophet in the line of many of their great teachers, those who are heirs to the faith of Father Abraham. Even most who do not call themselves Christian know and respect his name.

Call it the plan of God, call it the accident of history, call it the confluence of countless coincidences, differing commentators name all of the above – call it what you will – what you cannot do is deny that it is true: There is no name like the name of Jesus.

The name is important to me not because history has been parsed by his life and death, the calendar now dividing our time into “Before Christ” and “In the Year of Our Lord” (not “After Death” as I sometimes hear people say!). Because of the way I was raised, and due to the

trajectory my life has followed, the name, Jesus, is important to me not because it is important to the world. I think its place would not change in my life even if his followers still comprised a small, persecuted cult, on the outskirts of the mainstream of society. No, his name is much more intimately important to me because it is etched onto soul, seared into my oldest memories, carved upon my heart. Jesus is for me, very simply, the face of God. I learned years ago to say it in the words of my professor of systematic theology: “I believe in God because I believe in Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

In one way or another Jesus has been all of my answers. The preacher asked the children during a Sunday morning Children’s Sermon: Boys and girls, what is the little brown animal that plays in the trees? No reply. You know, it has a large tail and jumps from branch to branch? Still, no reply. It has a small brown body and a large tail and it gathers nuts for the winter? Finally one little girl raised her hand and cautiously said, “Preacher, I know the answer is Jesus – but it sounds an awful lot like a squirrel to me!” Jesus has been all of my answers. In more recent years, Jesus has also been all of my questions.

I cannot separate my life with Jesus and my life without him. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century educator and theologian, Horace Bushnell, said that children should be raised never knowing a time when they were not Christian. Bushnell’s “Christian nurture” is my experience, for though I remember the day I walked the aisle at the First Baptist Church of Clinton, SC, and can still feel the warm breath of my father speaking quietly in my ear as my pastor after I expressed my desire to “accept Jesus,” and can still feel the warm embrace of the waters of my baptism... I cannot

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Frank Tupper, then of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, would go on to say something like, “Or, without Jesus, God would mean nothing... would be an insignificant, abstract thought,” etc... When I first heard Dr. Tupper’s statement I disagreed: I believed in Jesus because I believed in God. But I have come to see that Tupper is right – without Jesus, I simply could not believe in the God that I do believe in.

remember a day that I did not know Jesus. To me, he has been Lord. Savior. Friend. Prophet.

Example.

So why have I had such a hard time conceptualizing this sermon? A sermon on the name and the place of Jesus, of all things, should be a “piece of cake” for a Baptist minister, shouldn’t it!?

I suppose the answer is: it depends. It depends on what kind of Baptist minister you are. If you are the kind for whom the traditional names and images and concepts of Jesus are beyond question, then this sermon writes itself. In fact, it is the only sermon there is to preach.

I heard this sermon last week at the funeral of my great aunt, in Little Rock, SC. She had been a member of that little Baptist church for fifty years – and the Sr. Minister has served there for forty-nine of those years. About fifty people attend his church every Sunday, and most of them were there for the funeral service. The rest of the congregation that day comprised family members, many of whom are involved in vocational Christian ministry. Yet even to that congregation – those who hear him preach every Sunday, and the rest of us who preach our own sermons on Sunday, the eulogy for my dear aunt quickly became the platform for the message of the salvation of Jesus, the one and only divine son who was sent by God to die on the cross to save us of our sins – and unless you know his salvation, you will surely spend an eternity in hell. That was the message for my aunt, and for anyone in that congregation who may not have gotten the message – despite the fact that it is the same one they hear Sunday after Sunday.

And then we went from that beautiful little sanctuary, not more than 100 feet, to the cemetery out back, where the Sr. Minister’s son, who is now the Associate Minister, preached

the same sermon at the graveside. Maybe this was for any who may have backslidden between the front door to the back! It was the sermon about Jesus, the one and only divine son who was sent by God to die on the cross to save us of our sins – and unless you know his salvation, you will surely spend an eternity in hell.

If you are the kind of Baptist minister for whom those traditional names and images and concepts of Jesus are without question, then this sermon writes itself.<sup>2</sup> But, just as Jesus has been my Savior, as he is theirs, he has also, always been, a disturber of my peace.

Over the years, my understanding of Jesus has changed. And so my preaching about Jesus – the way I use his name – has changed, also. So sometimes now, preaching about Jesus is difficult. It is not so because I am embarrassed about my new Jesus, nor self-conscious of my decision to let go of some of the traditional names and images and concepts. Preaching is sometimes difficult because as a pastor I deeply respect the personal journey of faith, and I know how essential Jesus is to the journeys of so many of you. I know that many of you have the same emotional connection to Jesus as I do. I am committed to the personal aspects of Jesus, and I am committed to your personal journeys with Jesus. But I am also committed to understanding my faith with the fullest use of my mind.

More than a century ago, biblical scholars began to look critically at our texts, to examine them, for the first time, as they would have examined any other ancient document. Prior to this the Bible had always been treated differently, protected from scrutiny because it stood in a category unto itself as The Word of God. But scholars of this study, now known as the historical-

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<sup>2</sup> Please understand that I am sincerely not intending to disparage my Great Aunt's pastors. To her, and to the other members of that congregation, they have been ministers. And in so many ways they truly embody the message of Christ's love and forgiveness. And though I disagree with their theology, they are sincere in it, and are following in a Christian tradition that is centuries old and well attested. Sometimes, honestly, I envy their certainty. But it is a theology to which I no longer ascribe – certainly not in the literalness to which they apply it.

critical method, began to expose the Bible to close examination and critical analysis. And, to (dangerously!) summarize more than a hundred years of scholarship in a few sentences, what they learned is that far from being a seamless text, written by one or a few authors in one sitting, to convey one message, the text reveals dozens of sources, pieced together over hundreds of years, from varying places and sometimes, quite divergent voices. And, when taken together, far from creating a harmony of facts and historical records, our scripture, including the Gospels which tell the story of Jesus' life, comes to light and new life as a multi-layered, theological narrative. The Gospels are not, as many continue to think of them, simply records of Jesus' life, told in the way a newspaper reporter would record "just the facts." Mainstream biblical scholars, most of whom are committed Christians themselves, have begun to unwrap the layers of the texts, and are now comfortable to say, as Marcus Borg puts it, "that every story and word of Jesus has been shaped by the eyes and hands of the early church."<sup>3</sup> Every story. Every word of Jesus – a theological interpretation of who the Church was coming to believe he was.<sup>4</sup>

Did Jesus say, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me*"? (John 14) Or is this the affirmation of the Church, penned by a man who called himself John, who was writing not to convey a set of facts, but to give witness to the personal transformation that Jesus was still bringing to the lives of people, even seventy years after his

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<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, p.9.

<sup>4</sup> This is clearly a view that is not accepted by many Christians, who still essentially want scripture protected from such scrutiny because scripture does, to them, belong in a different category than any other text in the world. The historical-critical method, however, is not a fly-by-night program of ultra-liberal scholars seeking to discredit the Bible, or its message. It is the accepted understanding of scripture by mainstream scholars from Roman Catholic to Baptist, and it began over 100 years ago. How slow is the march of time, and the movement of scholarship from the "ivory tower" to the pew! The "Jesus disconnect" (my words) between pulpit and pew that Marcus Borg discusses (see below) stems largely from the fact that mainline pastors have been trained for decades in a method that makes implications, if not outright explicit statements, that are incompatible with the common ideas that continue to circulate, widely regarding scripture and its teachings, even in progressive churches. As I express in this sermon, pastors find it difficult to bridge this "disconnect," so, in many/ most cases, the implications of such important (and I believe spiritually invigorating) study, are dismissed altogether, for the sake of "keeping the peace." I am trying to find a way to be open to the best of scholarship and to be carefully, sensitively, pastoral at the same time. (And I am finding it difficult!)

death?<sup>5</sup> Is our beloved production called Tableau a literal re-enactment of the night of Jesus' birth, or is it really "The Greatest Story Ever Told," a story of the developing Church that grew and expanded between the time of Jesus' actual birth, and Luke's telling of it, which came decades after Jesus died. Is it a newspaper report, exactly how it happened, or is it a theological affirmation of the way God still works in this world?

If you are a pastor who is convinced, because of the finds of such scholarship, that we must learn to read our texts anew, if you are not afraid of opening your mind to a different understanding of scripture and of God, the kind of things you say about Jesus will have to change. But if you are a pastor who also cares deeply about your people, you will want to find careful ways to change people's understanding of their Jesus. So I boldly underlined these words that Marcus Borg writes in his book, *Jesus: A New Vision*:

As a consequence, among mainstream clergy there is often a strange silence about what Jesus was like as a historical figure. Christian preaching about Jesus is left to those who still think of the popular image as historical and who can therefore proclaim that image with confidence. When mainstream clergy do preach about Jesus, understandably they tend to emphasize the *kerygma*, the message of the early church about Jesus, and not Jesus himself. No wonder the popular image remained so dominant, for Christians are typically not exposed to a persuasive and compelling alternative image.<sup>6</sup>

As a pastor and as a Christian, I want to honor Jesus' name with my words and with my life. But, I don't want to sing "There is a fountain filled with blood," anymore, as much as I love

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<sup>5</sup> To suggest that Jesus may not have literally, historically, uttered these exact words would be heresy for many – and there certainly is a power implicit of anyone who could have made such literal statements (and be accepted for who he claimed to be). However, it seems an even more powerful statement to me, when made by the Church (and placed onto the lips of Jesus), because more than seven decades after Jesus' death they continued to experience the presence of the living Christ as real and life-changing. And this interpretation also gives the text more of an "experiential" feel – for though Jesus is no longer with us, to make such literal claims, the presence of the living Christ is still with the Church of today, and as long as we can still make the claim, we legitimate the power of Jesus in our own experience. Faith is not just believing that Jesus said something 2,000 years ago – it is the claim that such an experience is still available to us today, and living that claim in our relationships.

<sup>6</sup> Borg, p.134.

the old hymn for sentimental reasons. As a living Christian community, I want Park Road Baptist Church to be open to the best and the most compelling of scholarship about all of our world, and I want us to espouse a theology that best adheres to the realities of this world.<sup>7</sup> But I don't want us to be afraid to claim our faith in Jesus, personally, enthusiastically.

And as we read a text like Paul's magnificent hymn to Christ, I want us to look with critical eyes, but not to have to walk away. I want us to find in the heart of this text the life-changing message Paul intended. For that which is most important about Paul's proclamation is not just a Christological doctrine, that may be helpful to dialogue about, but a practical and ethical exhortation: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...* Be like Jesus. Whatever claims you have to fame or fortune or power or prestige or comfort or convenience – whatever your securities... give them up, that as you descend into the reality of your own humanity, even as you die the small deaths of forgiveness and love that relationships require, that you too may be raised, with Christ, to know the fullness of the presence of God.

I know of no other name that can inspire us to such self-sacrificing greatness. And his name is my only hope for immortality. So may we have the courage to open our minds to know who Jesus really was, and the conviction, even in a day of critical scholarship and cultural challenge, to make his name our own.

May it be so.

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<sup>7</sup> I believe that biblical scholarship is part and parcel of the scholarship and advance of our entire civilization, so if we can accept the scholarship of technology, of science, of medicine (which obviously we do), then we should be willing to see biblical scholarship as on par with other disciplines – even if it means opening our minds to new ways of understanding. We have done so with the finds of science and technology and medicine, which have presented numbers of frightening ideas that are now understood and fully accepted as “reality.” Why should people of faith approach the study of faith with skepticism? Does Jesus himself not exhort us to love God with heart and soul and strength – and mind!?! (Mark 12)

