

## Sermon

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*Son of Man or Superman? – Part 2*

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Last week, I posed to you a question Jesus asks of his disciples: who do you say he is? While the crowds of the time sympathetic to his message viewed him as the return of a prophet like Jeremiah or Elijah, many people today equate him with Superman. They see him as otherworldly, “a heavenly being,” writes the theologian Dorothee Soelle, “who has nothing to do with us, who sees, hears, and can do everything” (*Theology for Skeptics*, p. 88).

Now if Soelle is right, if people often think of Jesus as fundamentally different from the rest of us, a perfect being from another world, I have another question for you: how is it Jesus came to be viewed this way?

Soelle offers one answer. She attributes this Christology or *view of Jesus* to the “churchly language” we use in our hymns and worship services. This is what we get, she says, for speaking of him as Messiah, Lord, Son of God, King of Kings, or God from God – a superhero who promises to save us when we can no longer help ourselves.

### The Problem

The trouble in speaking of Jesus as a heavenly being is that it not only makes him irrelevant to our lives. It also sets us up for disappointment. What happens, for example, when the superhero we expected to save us in times of trouble never intervenes or arrives, at least not in the way we anticipated?

The inadequacy of equating Jesus with Superman requires a corrective: we need to rediscover Jesus’ humanity, to plant his feet firmly on the ground. In so doing, I believe, the good news will become more apparent to us.

Here is how I see it: by descending into the flesh of Christ, God joins us in our limitations, our struggles, our challenges, and even in the anxiety we have over death. He shows us we are not alone, that whenever we find ourselves in the darkest valleys of life, we shall “fear no evil,” for God in Christ is with us (see Psalm 23:4).

Christ walks in our shoes. He is the Son of Man, not Superman. He doesn’t simply solve our problems. He joins us as we face them, giving us the power – as the Apostle Paul testifies – to “do all things” as the one who strengthens us (see Philippians 4:13).

### Another Issue

Our affirmation of Christ’s full humanity introduces a second question.

If Christ was indeed human, then in what way was he divine? Do we have any alternative for describing the presence of God within him than the “churchly language” we mentioned earlier, the kind that makes him irrelevant to our lives by

speaking of him as a heavenly being who – to cite Paul from our second reading – swoops down only in the end to rescue us from our problems (Philippians 3:20)?

What if we have no alternative for speaking of Christ's divinity at the expense of his humanity? Maybe we should give up referring to him as divine altogether. After all, we have considerable precedent in the Gospels for understanding Jesus as the last in a long line of prophets, that is, *human beings* who function as messengers of God.

Consider Luke's Gospel.

The Gospel of Luke portrays Jesus almost from the beginning as a prophet. Recall what happens, for example, when he reads the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue of his hometown at the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus tells the people Isaiah's prophecy regarding the appearance of a liberator refers to him. Then he adds that, like the prophets of old, they will reject him, which is exactly what they do by chasing him out and then nearly driving him off a cliff.

Jesus' response confirms his identity. "No prophet," he says, "is accepted in his hometown" (Luke 4:24).

Luke 13 once again has Jesus present himself as a prophet, a messenger of God (*ibid.*). When the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, Jesus sends them back with a clear message: "[you] tell that *fox* I answer to a higher authority" (Jeremy Williams, *Working Preacher*, accessed online; italics mine).

This is not a compliment! As commentator Jeremy Williams explains, "Foxes in both Greek and rabbinic literature were depicted as crafty, sinister creatures" (*ibid.*). Even today we think of foxes as sly and cunning. By casting aside the warning of the Pharisees, "Jesus insists that [Herod, the provincial governor] of Galilee will not hinder his work of casting out demons like Legion (Luke 8:26-39) who represent military might" (*ibid.*).

Jesus' reference to himself as a hen that seeks to gather her chicks, the little ones of Jerusalem, under her wing serves to confirm his identity in opposition Herod. He seeks to protect the less fortunate, the downtrodden, the oppressed who gathered in Jerusalem. Herod, on the other hand, is the proverbial *fox in the hen-house* who criminalizes and destroys "truth-tellers." The fact that Jesus will die in Jerusalem confirms his identity as a prophet. God's messengers may be relatively safer in the countryside, but in Jerusalem, the big city, their chances of survival are considerably less.

### **More than a Prophet**

But wait! Isn't Jesus more than a prophet? After all, according to today's Gospel, he is casting out demons and curing people (Luke 13:32). What kind of prophet can do that? What kind of *prophet* can perform "deeds of power" or miracles?

One need only think of the prophet Elisha to answer in the affirmative. He was famous for performing miracles. In one case, he fed 100 people with 20 loaves of bread and some leftover, a story the Gospel writers clearly reframed to show how Jesus

surpassed his predecessors by feeding 5,000 people with an even smaller amount of food (see 2 Kings 4:42-44).

Like Jesus, who cursed a fig tree and made it barren for no apparent reason, Elisha had his “off-days” too. According to 2 Kings 2:23-24, when a group of boys made fun of Elisha for being bald, the prophet cursed them in the name of the Lord. Just then, two female bears sprang out of the forest and mauled forty-two of them (see 2 Kings 2:23-24)

Thankfully, Jesus had hair! More seriously, we should add that he used his powers to help and heal the less fortunate as a manifestation of God’s emerging kingdom. He never harmed them.

The fact that prophets like Elisha could also be wonder-workers illustrates something important about Jesus. He may have been greater than his predecessors, but his uniqueness was only one of “degree,” not “kind.” This is a fancy way of saying that Jesus surpassed those who came before him in terms of his abilities, even though he remained only human.

## **Rethinking Divinity**

What separates Jesus, then, from his predecessors in “kind” rather than by “degree”? Luke 13:32 offers us a preliminary clue. There, we recall, Jesus tells the Pharisees that he will continue healing people of their diseases today, tomorrow, and third day when he will finish his work or (even better) “when he will be completed.” As Williams points out, “The completion of the third day, for a Christian reader, *shouts resurrection*” (*ibid*; italics mine).

Jesus, we learn, has a destiny different than predecessors. According to Paul, his true identity was confirmed when God raised him from the dead as the “first fruits” of God’s new creation. At that point he was declared “Son of God” instead of merely a prophet (see Romans 1:4).

Of course, other writers in the New Testament will extend his status as the Son of God all the way back to the beginning of his ministry (Mark), his birth (Matthew, Luke), or the beginning everything (John). But these writers all had to work backwards, as Paul did, from the resurrection. Otherwise, they would have seen Jesus (at best) as a good man, a saint, who died a horrible, tragic death.

I wonder, however, if there is *another clue* regarding Jesus’ divinity. We know some of his predecessors were believed to be wonder-workers. We know, as we affirm today in the Nicene Creed, that the same Spirit manifest in him spoke through the prophets that lived before he did. But Jesus exhibits something else, something often lacking in the accounts we have of his predecessors.

Take a look again at the last two verses of our Gospel reading for today, Luke 13:34-35. Notice Jesus’ disposition. “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under his wings,” he says with profound compassion.

Jesus' compassion toward others surfaces repeatedly throughout the stories we have of him. Consider Mark 10:17-22, the story of the rich man. Here we have someone who has fulfilled all the duties of his religious tradition, yet one who still yearns for something more. "Good teacher," he asks Jesus, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Mark gives us exquisite insight into Jesus' disposition. Instead of immediately prescribing a formula for his salvation, Jesus looked at him and *loved him*" (Mark 10:21; italics mine).

We see the same thing at the foot of the cross according to John's Gospel. Even in the hour of his greatest agony, Jesus looks to the well-being of others. "'Woman,'" he says to his mother, "'here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple whom he loved, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" to care for her (John 19:26-27).

I believe there is something "of God" in Jesus' disposition here toward his mother, the disciple whom he loved, and the rich man seeking eternal life, a supreme-actualization of capital "L" love in world-history. John's Gospel tells us that the "Word became flesh and lived among us," but I prefer to say that Love became flesh and lived among us, for God is love and that love became present and available to us in Jesus as his disposition confirms.

Indeed, as Lloyd Geering points out in *Reimagining God*, Jesus was unique in teaching us we should not only love our neighbor, we should love our enemies as well (p. 194).

## Conclusion

Dorothee Soelle puts it well.

After contending, as I have, that we need to recover Jesus' humanity to draw him down from heaven and make him relevant in our lives, she sees divinity beaming through this same humanity. How? In his manner or way of being there for others. "He let this light shine through himself," Soelle writes, "he did not hide it in the depths of his soul, he gave it out. He was the man-for-others because he was the man of God and knew himself to be so borne up by God that he did not fall out of God, even when he felt himself abandoned by God [when crucified]" (Skeptics, p. 96).

What if we were to act toward others the way God in Christ has acted toward us? Are we not, after all, asked to be Christ to one another? Are we not asked to seek Christ in others, especially the less fortunate?

Perhaps Christ is born every time we live for others as he did. Perhaps that's why history cannot erase his name, for every time we tend to a neighbor or look out for someone in need, we manifest his presence, just as he manifested the presence of God.

Last week, I posed to you a question Jesus asks of his disciples: who do you say he is? In the Apostles' Creed we affirm his humanity. In the Nicene Creed we affirm his divinity. In our lives we affirm his humanity and divinity when we live as he did, not simply for ourselves but as people who live for others.

Amen.