

**Sermon** February 2, 2025  
[Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40]

*"Who do you say I am?"*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

"Who do you say I am?"

Two weeks ago, we talked about hope in an age of uncertainty, political chaos, climate change and so forth. How do people cope? How do people endure? Where do they find hope? Where might we find hope?

For us as Christians, the answer was simple: Jesus. Jesus is the basis for our hope.

The question is, how, or in what way? In John's Gospel, Jesus performed seven signs, which we heard about, to illustrate who Jesus was. We'll focus here on two: *Water turning into wine*. This sign John uses to refer to Holy Communion and how Jesus's blood washes away our sins. By *raising Lazarus from the dead*, John also shows us how Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life. Through him, God, accordingly, conquers sin, which is separation from God, and death, which is ultimate separation from God.

That, in summary, is who *John* says Jesus is.

But who is he to *you*? What to you is his significance? What speaks *to you* most about him? Your answer will be what theologians call your "Christology," which is to say, your view of, or understanding of who Jesus was and what he accomplished.

Now in today's message, I'm going to share what others say about who Jesus was. Then I'm going to talk about who our Second Reading and Gospel reading for today say he is, and *then* – you'll love this – I'm going to take a poll. I'm going to ask you, as a congregation, individually, members thereof, which portrait or image of Christ speaks to you most among the ones I list, and why; *which portrait or image of Christ speaks to you the most, and why*. My own hope is that, each in our own way, we can answer the question Jesus asks his disciples in Matthew, Mark and Luke, namely, "Who do you say that I am?"

Many years ago, back in 1985, Jaroslav Pelikan, a famous historian of Christianity, published what the *Christian Science Monitor* called at the time "a gracious little masterpiece." The title of this gracious little masterpiece was "Jesus through the Centuries." In it, Pelikan looked at how each major era of Western culture answered the question, "Who do you say I am?"

In the first century, for example, Jesus was pictured as a Rabbi, as a teacher of the law and as a prophet. That's the original Jewish context out of which Jesus and his ministry arose. By the fourth century, however, that is, the era of the Roman Emperor Constantine, Jesus became, not rabbi or teacher, but "the King of kings, the Lord of lords" – which ultimately ended up justifying Constantine's reign.

In the eighth and ninth century, Jesus was understood as inspiration for new art and architecture in the Byzantine culture. Hence Jesus becomes the "true image of God," or true icon of God. Or, as Hebrews 1:3 says, the "exact imprint of God's very being."

Pelikan details as well that during the European enlightenment, which took place in the 17th and 18th centuries, Jesus became the teacher of reason, or the “teacher of common sense.”

And in the 19th, 20th, and I would say now 21st century, Jesus has become, for many, “a Liberator.” That is, a liberator of the social order and also the political order, a liberation *from* these things, in other words, and we see this in the perspective of Mahatma Gandhi as well as Martin Luther King.

Now my task is not to show which of these is right, nor do I pretend to provide an exhaustive list. I’m interested rather in which, if any, speaks to you and why. Which, if any, stands out to you, and why? Or which, if any, resonates with you more than the others, and why?

Is it Jesus as Rabbi, as teacher and prophet?

Is it Jesus as Lord of lords and King of kings?

Is it Jesus as the image or “true icon of God”?

Is it Jesus the teacher of reason or common sense?

Or is it Jesus as political, social Liberator?

As you can see, there are many ways in the history of culture for answering the question, “Who do you say that I am?”

That said, while I’m not interested in “the right way,” as a pastor and theologian, or pastoral theologian of the church, I *am* interested in which of these Christologies conforms to Scripture; which is biblical. And here’s where the matter gets especially complicated.

Differing Christologies exist in Scripture as well, something our Second Reading and Gospel Reading for today confirm. Let’s take a look:

In Hebrews, we have up to three images, or three Christologies.

For this writer, Jesus is the “victorious champion over death.” We see evidence for that in verses 14 through 15, “Since therefore the children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death (that is the devil) and free those who, all their lives, were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

Now, the Latin phrase for this particular Christology is *Christus Victor*. It was something emphasized by Martin Luther, as well as subsequent Lutheran hymnody: Jesus overcomes death. Jesus frees us from the fear of death.

But Hebrews doesn’t stop there. It also identifies Jesus as a “Sacrificial Victim” who cleanses us of our sin. Take a look, if you will, again at the Second Reading, verse 17:

“Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.”

Now, when I read a passage like that, I always think it’s helpful to clarify what the author seems to understand sacrifice to be. Coming out of the Levitical tradition in Judaism, this author would have understood it as *expiatory*, which is to say, it *cleanses* us of our sin. This is not *propitiary*, which is the most common understanding of his sacrifice today,

which indicates, according to the theologian Anselm, that Jesus's death was a sacrifice to propitiate or *satisfy God's wrath* over our sin. These are two *very* different ways of talking about sacrifice. One biblical, the other, I would argue, extra-biblical.

We also finally have Jesus in this passage from Hebrews as "the Companion" – in Spanish, the *Compañero Cristo*, insofar as he identifies with *our* suffering, our temptation, and even, especially, our death. Take a look at the reading one more time, from verses 14a and 18:

"Since therefore the children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things." And then again, verse 18, "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." And again, the beginning of verse 17, "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect."

This suggests that Jesus identifies with our suffering, that Jesus identifies with our anxiety, that Jesus is the Companion for those of us who suffer, who are tempted, and all of us who face death. Jesus as the Companion. Makes me think of Psalm 23: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me."

Now in Luke's gospel, we have *another* Christology. Here, Jesus is "the Savior of all people." Take a look at verses 32, and then 38.

Verse 32: "A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people, Israel." "Gentiles" here, arguably, stands for all people who are not Jewish. So Jesus here is not only the savior of people within the Israelite tradition, but also those outside of it as well.

Again, verse 38: At that moment she [Anna] came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

All who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Jesus as "the Savior of all people," in the Gospel of Luke, particularly, makes perfect sense. Why? Because Luke, possibly a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul, is also probably the only Gentile author in the New Testament. So of course, he's going to expand, as Paul did, the mission and ministry of Jesus out into the world of the Gentiles.

You hear this every Sunday with the Words of Institution, "Shed for you and for all people," – Jew and Gentile alike.

Now, I don't know about you, but there are a couple images here that speak to me. But first, I do want to hear from you. Which of these speaks or stands out to you?

Now note, I'm not asking which of these do you think is doctrinally correct, or which of these is theologically sound, or which of these is thorough-goingly Biblical. I'm simply curious: Which of these images speaks to you? Which of these images stands out to you? Which of these is the closest to your Christology, *your* understanding of who Jesus was?

Is it Jesus as Rabbi, that is, teacher of the law, and prophet?

Is it Jesus as the Lord of lords and King of Kings?

Is it Jesus during the Byzantine era, as the icon or true image of God?

Is it Jesus during the Enlightenment, the teacher of reason or common sense.

Is it Jesus as Liberator, according to Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi?

Or is it Jesus, as Luther emphasizes, the Conqueror for death?

Is it Jesus as sacrificial victim? Is it Jesus as *compañero Cristo*, Companion to all of us?

Or is it Jesus, Savior of all people?

I thought I was going to make this easier. I realize that's a rather extensive list, but what I want to do is go back through each of these and ask you to identify two that especially speak to you and why.

"Jesus as Rabbi," raise your hand. Okay, alright.

What about Jesus as Lord of Lord and King of Kings? Does that speak to you?

What about Jesus as the true image or icon of God? I like that one too.

What about Jesus as the teacher of what our culture could probably use today, common sense? Okay? Jesus as teacher of common sense.

What about Jesus as Liberator? Raise your hand high, Jesus as Liberator.

And what about Jesus as Conqueror of death?

Jesus as Sacrifice?

Jesus as Companion?

I know, you only get two. I quite remember, and you only get two.

Yeah, Jesus as the savior of all people (I knew Ingrid would go for this one.)

Now for me, I'm in agreement with the majority of you. The way I like to see Jesus, apart from Rabbi, of course, and Conqueror of Death, is as our Companion.

In a recent article for *The Atlantic*, Derek Thompson writes, "Americans are alone, historically, unprecedentedly alone." What better way to portray Jesus than in a culture where people are pervasively experiencing isolation; where people are "going bowling alone," as Robert Putnam put it years ago; where people no longer find themselves in community with others: Jesus as our Companion.

My *absolute* favorite, however, is not on the list (which is kind of cheating, but I'm the preacher, I get to do it anyway.)

Jesus, in the words of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and later the feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle, is "the Man (or Person) for Others," something you hear me preach often.

One of my favorite verses in this regard is the story of how a young man approaches Jesus and asks what he may do to inherit eternal life. The text doesn't have Jesus give a lecture to this person. It says, "Jesus looked at him and he loved him." There's something there that really resonates with me, that it's Jesus' disposition that makes possible the god-presence in Him manifest to us all.

Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" As you can see from today's message, there are many answers. For my money, the best ones bring out different facets of the Good News or Gospel: that Jesus has overcome death; that Jesus is your companion; that Jesus has wiped away sin.

May that Good News, in whatever form, be yours, today and always.

In Jesus' name, Amen.