

***Nothing More Important: The Jesus Question***      **Isaiah 42:1-4**  
**Pastor Judy Bangsund**      **Hebrews 1:1-9**  
**March 12, 2017**      **Matthew 16:13-16**

If you were here last week, then you know that I will retire at the end of this month. Of course, it's been a long time coming. But now it feels like it's coming up fast. So I have to remind myself: we are still here today in the present; and today is really all we have. I want to use my "todays" well. So starting today I'll be preaching a final 3-part sermon series. Maybe we can call this the "final three" or "March Madness" or whatever – perhaps it's a little of both.

Given this opportunity I ask myself – what do I really want to say? In this kind of situation, you think, "What is most important?" And as I ponder and pray about this, I know I am influenced by what has shaped my whole life and ministry. And what I've been reading lately only underscores all that. Lately I've been working on materials for our Adult Ed Sunday morning class. That includes the class they are just finishing up now: a real Saul-to-Paul conversion by a devout Muslim, Nabeel Qureshi, to Christianity. (Check him out on youtube.) Also, the next 2 classes on the death and resurrection of Jesus -- one by Philip Yancey and one by Bishop N. T. Wright. And finishing up in May, a series on Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who took part in the Resistance in Nazi Germany. As I bring my nose out of my books and my head out of the clouds I realize that I want to say what is *most important* to your faith and mine. What is crucial to our lives as Christians and followers of Jesus. Here is where I land: *Jesus* as central to your faith; *Scripture* as foundation of your faith; and your *calling* as your response to faith.

Because these are big topics, each one worthy of a full series on its own, I have to focus. And this is my focus -- and yours: how would you explain to someone else why these things are so important? What would be your bullet points, your elevator speech? Because let's face it – we live in a 140-character world. People just don't give you their time and attention for long. So I want you to use the back of your bulletins these three weeks – not so much to take notes, as to jot down bullet points, as the Holy Spirit speaks to you. What will make sense to the next guy? What builds your case? If *nothing is more important* than Jesus, Scripture and your calling, how would you articulate that to someone else?

Today we're going to take a look at the Jesus question. Because *Jesus* is the most distinguishing factor of Christianity. It's not about monotheism; nor about being spiritual; nor about being good or ethical. These things are important, but you can also find them in other religions. In fact, it's not about religion! Bonhoeffer said this: "...the essence of Christianity is not about religion at all, but about the person of Christ." See, if this were just about a religion – big deal! There are lots of religions to choose from. Religion is a human activity. But Jesus brings relationship, not religion. It's not about religion; it's about a *person*. It is Jesus himself that is most compelling. And that's how it all started in the first place: people listening to him, watching him, being drawn to him. Following him. The one thing that is unique about Christianity is Christ.

So in your elevator speech, first consider the person of Jesus himself. Tell about who he was, how he lived his life on earth, what he said and did. I've told you about the time when I was invited to speak to junior high students at the International School while we lived in East Africa. It was a comparative religion course, and I was asked to speak about Christianity. I came

intending to talk about the religion, but soon realized that what was important was the person of Jesus! Now, my audience was diverse: all 7th-8th graders, but from everywhere from Japan to America, and from Scandinavia to Australia. Most of them were coming from other faiths (and many from no faith at all), and had never heard about the person of Jesus before. And I'm telling you: they were mesmerized as I talked about the prophets who had foretold him; the angels at his birth; how he lived his life; his teachings and miracles. Many had never heard the story before -- you could have heard a pin drop. And then I told them what it meant that this amazing person was crucified and raised from the dead -- this is what people need to hear!

Because you see, Jesus is not only a compelling person, he is also the Son of God -- he is unique among men. Mohammed didn't make that claim, nor did Moses or other religious leaders. Only Jesus. And people responded to him as to God himself, worshiping him, declaring his lordship. A Japanese translator was working with missionaries early on to translate the Bible. As he read through the Gospels for the first time he grew increasingly agitated, saying, "Who is this Man about whom I have been reading, this Jesus? You call him a man, but He must be God." Read through the Gospels again, as if it were the first time, and you will see what I mean. The biblical record is clear, as we read in our lessons today.

Jesus, the person, is where it all starts. But if it were only about a very compelling person, it wouldn't be enough to make a difference. Abraham Lincoln and Ghandi are compelling figures. It's the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, and came to die for us -- that's big. That's earth-shaking. It begins with the Person of Jesus, but it's his Work, the cross and resurrection, that clinches the deal.

OK. I know. Cross and resurrection together is worthy of an entire series. It's the basis of everything we say all year long. In fact, it's the focus of our Wednesday night services this year. My friends, make every effort to be there so you, too, can talk about the cross.

Today I'm not going into many specifics. You already know a lot. But let me say just three things about the crucifixion (and again, my focus is the kinds of questions people ask). First, it really happened. Jesus really died. The biblical and historical evidence is too strong to deny it. The Romans were really good at crucifixions and they got the system down pat. No one ever came off a cross alive.

Secondly, when Jesus died on the cross he fixed the problem of sin, once and for all. Now, the problem of sin is tricky to talk about. What can you say about *sin* to a person for whom this is an archaic and irrelevant word? Here's a thought: you can talk about all the *wrong* in the world. Everyone will get that -- there is, indeed, a lot that is wrong with this world. And that wrong is not just out there -- it's also in here. It's a little like the potholes that are now riddling our roads in the Bay area. Sure, they can be fixed, one by one; but in the meantime, more will appear, because of settling, lack of underground water, whatever. What Jesus did on the cross was not to fix the potholes one by one; but to create a whole new road, with new material that will never break down again. (There are at least five, six different ways of understanding Jesus' work on the cross -- so important to our faith. Wednesday nights. Be there.)

Third, Jesus' death was severe because the problem is severe. Think of it: if a criminal is convicted of one crime, he gets maybe 15-25 years. If he has committed many crimes, then all those individual sentences are added together. It's possible for one person to accumulate a sentence of hundreds of years -- which, given natural human limitations, means a single life sentence. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, over the span of all human history. He took on all those sentences and suffered for them. It was not possible for him to pay the penalty for sin by just dying in his sleep.

Jesus suffered a crucifixion, one of the most torturous deaths known to man, for this reason. The good news is that it all didn't end in the grave. Jesus rose from the dead. Now, to be honest: the historical fact of the crucifixion is not hard for most people to believe. Even skeptics will acknowledge Jesus' death. The hard one is the Resurrection. Let's face it – even his followers didn't see that coming, and Jesus had told them plainly in advance! Mary Magdalen, at the tomb, mistook Jesus for a gardener. The men on the Emmaus road didn't recognize Jesus, either. His disciples had to be convinced that they were not seeing a ghost. For many people, the truth of the Resurrection is the hardest one to grasp.

But again, the evidence is strong. Jesus appeared, not just to the favored 12, but to many – more than 500 people, at various times and places, over a period of 40 days. Christian history also affirms the truth of the Resurrection. N. T. Wright says, "There is no form of early Christianity known to us that does not affirm that after Jesus' shameful death God raised him to life again." And to me, the clincher is the way Jesus' followers changed as a result. Men who had previously been shaking in their boots, hiding away in secret rooms, were now filling the streets, boldly preaching the resurrected Christ. Those who had been fear-filled were now fearless. They faced the loss of every thing they had, even their lives, for the truth of the Resurrection. Not only they, but many others throughout the centuries since then. The disciples didn't make it all up. It was no lie. My friends, liars make poor martyrs.

And the Resurrection was necessary. It put its validating stamp on all that Jesus said and did, including the crucifixion. If the crucifixion defeated the power of sin, then the resurrection defeated the power of death. These are our two great enemies. Not terrorists. Not global warming. Sin and death are, when it comes right down to it, the two things we fear the most. Paul said, "We are, of all people, most to be pitied if our hope is only in this life." The resurrection happened; it had to happen; it changed the lives of individuals and the course of history.

As I said earlier, I've been reading a lot lately. Right now I'm deep into Bonhoeffer. He was only 39 when he was killed in a concentration camp, a brilliant theologian and a very caring pastor. He was engaged to be married – he faced the loss of a beautiful future – and still he participated in a very dangerous plot to kill Hitler. He died on the gallows, just two weeks before the American troops arrived. And he went with composure, filled with faith. One guard saw him shivering in the cold of dawn and sneered, "What's wrong, Pastor? Afraid?" Bonhoeffer looked at him with some surprise. "No, not afraid," he answered simply. "Just cold." Other observers commented on that day: "I have never seen anyone face death so calmly." "He

submitted himself to the will of God completely." On his way to the gallows he told someone, "This is the end. For me, it's the beginning of life."

How do you face the end of your life with such faith? It's because of the power of the resurrection – and God's promise to sustain us in that moment. Bonhoeffer wrote a lot about it. He said, "God alone knows the day of your death, and nothing you can do will change that. So live your life fully and freely! Take whatever risks you need to take to submit to his will." Think about it! If God has numbered your days (as Scripture says), then there is nothing to fear! You can live boldly and fearlessly, doing the work of the Kingdom, because nothing will interfere with God's numbering system.

Nabeel Qureshi, who at great personal sacrifice became a Christian, wondered why so few of his Christian friends bothered to tell him about their faith. He concluded that either they didn't really believe it, or they didn't really care about him, their friend. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? That he died and rose again... for you? Do you care about your unbelieving friends, family and neighbors? If the answer to these questions is "yes," then you need to be prepared to give an account for your faith.

The Person of Jesus, his crucifixion and resurrection are all true. At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul says this:

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Press on! Take hold of these truths about the Person and Work of Jesus; put them into words so that you can express them to another. Jesus has already taken hold of you. And there is nothing more important than that. Amen.