Advent Questions: “Who Is Jesus?”
Matthew 11:2-7

We’ve been considering Advent Questions. “What is Advent?” “Where is God?” and today we ask, “Who is Jesus?”

Our passage today is about John the Baptist. He and Jesus were cousins, about the same age. John was a prophet. His message was that the Messiah would soon appear. People should repent and get ready. Then he points to Jesus and says he’s it. John’s in prison and sends some of his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” It’s a good Advent question. That’s where we pick up the story.

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When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

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So, let’s pretend you are on a flight to Los Angeles to visit family for Christmas. You’re sitting next to a talker! We’ll call him Fred! Fred finds out where you’re going, and why, what you do for a living, and eventually finds out you go to church. (You won’t believe what else he found out!) Anyway, it’s going to be a long flight!

Fred is genuinely curious about the Christian faith. He’s never been to church. So over the course of this 4 hour flight, he asks some pretty tough questions; Do Christians take the Bible literally? What about creation and evolution? What’s a Presbyterian? And then he drops the big one. “Who is Jesus?” How you going to answer that one?

Where would you start? Is Jesus fully human, or fully God, or fully both? Was he a just a teacher, a prophet, or was he the Messiah? (And you’re going to have to explain Messiah!)
At Jesus’ baptism, John seemed real clear as to who Jesus was. Eight chapters later he’s confused. We’re not sure why. So, from prison he asks, “Are you the one to come…?” Good question.

There are a lot of people confused about who Jesus Christ is, including folk in the Church. That’s not new. The people of his day were confused about Jesus, even folks in his hometown. Jesus was not what they were expecting as the Messiah.

The Jewish expectation of the Messiah was that he would be;

- a great political leader
- descended from King David
- well versed and faithful to the Jewish law
- a charismatic leader, inspiring people to follow his example
- a great military leader who would win battles for Israel
- a human being, not God in human flesh, or supernatural in any way
- He would redeem the Jewish people by bringing them back to Israel and restoring Jerusalem.
- He would establish a government in Israel that would be the center of all world governments.
- And he would usher in a time of universal peace on earth, without crime, war or poverty.

The Messiah would fulfill the prophecies in Isaiah;

They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation will not lift sword against nation and they will no longer study warfare. (Isaiah 2:4)

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

None of that happened…not yet.

- This Jesus, son of a peasant family from little Nazareth, was not a great political leader.
- If he was born of a virgin, he did not share in Joseph’s bloodline, so he could not be a direct descendant of the great King David. The connection to David is through Joseph.
• He was well-versed in Jewish law, but they questioned his interpretation.
• He was charismatic, but he wasn’t a military leader.
• He claimed to be more than a mere human. He said things like, “Whoever has seen me as seen the Father.” (Jn 14:9a). No way God could be in human flesh!
• He did not establish Israel as a world government, nor did he usher in universal peace, creating a world without crime, war, or poverty.
• Besides all that, he was exactly what they were expecting!

Had I lived in that day, and was a part of the establishment, more than likely, I would not have embraced him either. He’s totally not it. (How’s Fred doing?)

*If we are confused about who Jesus is, the rest of it loses traction. If we’re not sure about who Jesus is, then Christmas is nothing more than a winter solstice holiday. Billions of babies are born in humble settings. Nothing novel there.

If we’re confused about Jesus, then Easter is just a day to welcome Spring. And can anybody explain what we’re doing at communion or baptism? Or, what do you say at a funeral if we’re confused about Christ? Death is death? Is that all we’ve got? Or maybe we believe in some sort of generic afterlife, created by Hollywood.

When we get confused, we make stuff up. We create the Jesus we would like to have; the one who gets you a parking space, or the one who fights for social justice. It depends on which Jesus you want.

But the sweet baby Jesus grew up, and some of us aren’t too comfortable with who he became!
• He opposes self-serving lives. Titles and special treatment don’t suit him.
• He is suspect of our wealth.
• He’s an advocate for the poor.
• He doesn’t like self-righteous behavior.
• Is intolerable of hypocrisy.
• Has very little patience with those who live as if they have no sin.
• Prefers honesty.
• Deplores works righteousness, or thinking our good deeds justify us.
• He will not let us off the hook concerning forgiveness.
• And he demands that we love all people – even our enemies.

You can see why some people sure hope he’s not the Messiah! We’d rather have a political military leader, somebody to set up a powerful nation.

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But then you have to consider this God who works out of the box! Think of Abraham and Sarah, too old to have children, but they do. Moses as a spokesman, but he has a speech impediment. Forty years in the wilderness eating manna, thin as frost. Forty years on manna! Little David, shepherd boy, drops huge Goliath, and then becomes the greatest king Israel ever knew. Doesn’t happen. And now Mary and Joseph, a common laborer, and they’re not married. The Messiah will come from them? Seriously?

It’s all out of the box! None of that is what we expected. If the Bible teaches us anything, it says we cannot limit God to our own understanding. And that’s good news, because sometimes all we see is the box. We can’t always see what God is doing in the world. We just have to want to see it. That’s Advent. Keep your eyes open for what you don’t expect!

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So, Fred has either changed seats or gone to sleep by now! You might want to wake him up! He asked a serious question, and we have a serious answer.

‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ (11:3)

We’d better hope he is the one, and that he is coming back. Merry Christmas, Fred!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen