

Sermon: Who Do You Say that I Am? A Hymn Sing

Text: Psalm 98

I have a confession to make -- one that might get me into trouble with a few super hero fans in the room: I really did not like the new Superman movie.

And it's not primarily because it lacked the charm and wit of the Christopher Reeve "Superman" of the 70's -- which it does -- and it's not primarily because it was so loud and noisy -- which it was. No, what really bothered me about the film is that our hero, morally upright Superman, who always does what is right, chooses to solve the main conflict of the film (spoiler alert) by killing the villain.

In the history of Superman, it has been a steadfast rule that Superman does not kill. And in the few exceptions where he has, the writers have been careful to show Superman as remorseful and conflicted over taking a life. Not this Superman. He spends the last third of the movie in a fight with the villain, destroying most of the real estate of the city in the process, and then the best solution he can find to the conflict is to take a life.

What is really shocking about this is the fact that the film studio is intentionally marketing this movie to churches and youth group, inviting them to compare Superman to Jesus, referring to Christ as "the original superhero" and providing sermon notes and discussion guides to show how the Superman story is really just a metaphor for the Jesus story. And lots of churches and Christian bloggers have jumped on that promotional band wagon, certain that if Jesus himself were here today, he too would be pummeling others in the name of truth, justice and the American way.

Of course, there are all kinds of possible allusions between Jesus and the character of Superman, but have the filmmakers and the Christians using this film for educational purposes missed the glaring contradictions between Christ and Kal-el? When did the church start forgetting that Jesus was a man of peace, adamantly opposed to violence against others? When did the Church forget that Jesus inspired a movement which was strictly pacifist for its first 500 years -- until it was co-opted and corrupted by the violent Constantinian Empire? When did we forget that the Jesus of the gospel believed "standing your ground" meant giving complete fidelity to caring for those in need, not proclaiming one's right to commit violence? I have to believe if Jesus were here today he would cradle the Trayvon Martin's of the world in his arms while challenging the George Zimmerman's of this world to seek a path away from violence and toward peace.

How is it that we often have so many images and portrayals of Jesus that are such polar opposites and so different from the man we find in scripture?

All of this is a reminder to me that no one has ever really had control of the Jesus image. His biography has always been open to interpretation and changes from age to age and place to place. Often it is popular culture that has helped define Jesus, from movies to books to toys and t-shirts. And perhaps most often through music.

We might classify many of the hymns about Jesus in our hymn book to be ancient -- some of them have certainly been around a long time. But it's helpful to remember that in their own day, many of them were the music of popular culture, trying to define Jesus for their own time and their own social location. This morning I'd like to invite us to take a journey together through some of that musical history, to sing together a few of our hymns about Jesus, and to pay close attention to the words, the imagery, and the theology that we have inherited from the past and which might be able to point us toward our future as a Church centered in the way of Christ.

The hymn "*Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn*" was composed in 1983 by Marty Haugen as part of the contemporary worship movement in the Catholic Church led by the St. Louis Jesuits, a group of seminarians at St. Louis University. Though the song has a contemporary sound, it speaks to an ancient hope that someday, somehow God would overturn the darkness of the world and fill the people's lives with peace and justice and compassion for all. This is a hymn of expectation, sung during Advent. As we sing this together, consider where there are still people in need in our world today -- those standing in lines at soup kitchens, living on the streets, suffering as victims of human trafficking, those caught in the midst of war and conflict -- so many children of God still waiting for a word of hope and the promise of love and peace. Let's sing together hymn #138 "*Awake, Awake, and Greet the New Morn*."

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Probably the most contentious debate about Jesus in the history of the Church can be summed up in the question: *Was he human or was he divine?* How would you answer that question for yourself? Some in the ancient church concluded Jesus' humanity was a mere illusion -- he only *appeared* to be human but was in fact completely divine. This understanding was eventually rejected by the church councils because they saw the importance of claiming Jesus' humanity -- that he was *one of us*. They eventually concluded that, in some way not easy to explain, Jesus was both human and divine.

In the familiar Christmas hymn "*Away in the Manger*," first printed in the 1800's, we have a decidedly human Jesus. He is birthed into the world just like all of us, as a meek and helpless baby -- a foreshadowing that as a man Jesus will reach out to those who are meek and powerless and help them claim their identity as beloved children of God. Let's sing together hymn #147 "*Away in a Manger*."

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When asked, "What was the focus of the life of the man Jesus?" the Church has never been able to settle on just one answer.

- Did he come to earth as a sacrifice for sin?

- Did he primarily see himself as a healer and mystic, one uniquely connected to the power of God's love and grace?
- Was he the prophesied Messiah, the son of God?
- Even the gospel writers couldn't quite agree on who Jesus was, but they do find commonality in lifting up Jesus' ministry of justice and compassion in a world so often overwhelmed by systems of domination and violence.
- In fact, the gospel writers put most of their focus on how Jesus led his life, on his teachings about charity and forgiveness, and on his outreach to the poor and the marginalized.

In the hymn "We Meet You O Christ," writer Fred Kann describes a Jesus whose presence can be felt even today, especially when we choose to walk Christ's way of compassion and mercy for all. Let us sing together hymn # 183 "We Meet You O Christ."

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Even as the gospel writers put most of their focus on the life of Jesus, they could not escape talking about his death, and neither can we. Christianity is the only major world religion whose central figure was executed by established authority. Clearly there was something about Jesus' teachings that threatened those in power. Think about this: If Jesus had only been preaching love and peace, he would have gone unnoticed by the Romans. Preaching love and peace does not get you nailed to a cross. No, it was his radical critique of the domination systems of the world and his pronouncement of the coming Kingdom of God's justice for all people that caught the attention of the authorities.

The words to the American spiritual "*Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley*," proclaim that Jesus had to walk that lonely journey to the cross by himself. No one else could do it for him. But the words don't stop there. They declare that you and I must walk that journey too. We must walk the path of dying to the world's ways of violence, greed, and domination -- die to those things that keep us from centering ourselves in God's love and grace, if we are to know new life in Christ.

Let's sing together hymn # 211 "Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley."

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In the ancient world – crucifixion meant annihilation.

- There was no body left to bury –
- You family and friends terrorized –
- No one ever spoke of the person again for fear the same thing might happen to them – It was as if they never existed.

Of course, Jesus' story does not end with crucifixion -- but resurrection. The Easter story is a powerful reminder that the earliest Christians proclaimed that death had no power over them! That in some way they continued to experience Jesus' presence even after this death. He was not just a memory of the past for his followers but a living reality in the present. Every time we gather in worship, particularly around the table of communion, and declare the real presence of the risen Christ, we proclaim God's "Yes" to the world's "No." For the apostle Paul, God's "yes" meant that we were now free to live as imitators of Christ, to experience new life in Christ here and now, and to allow Christ to live through us.

In the contemporary hymn, "In Remembrance of Me," writer Beryl Red points us to the centrality of Jesus' open table of truth and love for all and reminds us that we shouldn't seek him in the distant heavens, but right here, in our very midst.

I invite us all to stand in body or spirit as we sing together our hymn of reflection # 403 "In Remembrance of Me."