

New Year's Series: "Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah"

Sermon #1: "Searching for the 'Historical' Jesus"

Scripture: Luke 1:1-4 (to be read during the sermon)

Source: Rev. Adam Hamilton at the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, MO

<http://www.cor.org/worship/sermon-archives/show/sermons/King-Davids-Story-of-Sin-and-Redemption-1/>

Opening Video Clip

PP#1: "Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah"

"Searching for the 'Historical' Jesus"

"'But what about you?' Jesus asked. 'Who do you say I am?'" - Mark 8:29a

"Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah" "Searching for the 'Historical' Jesus"

"'But what about you?' Jesus asked. 'Who do you say I am?'"

We have just come through Christmas. And during Christmas we celebrated that Jesus was born. In Christmas, then, is the claim that Jesus was a real person, who lived long ago.

We, here at this church, claimed that He was born as the Savior of the world, the Son of God, truly Himself God, giver of the light and life in each person.

That's a pretty bold claim, you know. Do you believe that? Most people on earth right now don't believe that. Most people in the history of the world didn't believe that. If you do believe that, why do you?

PP#2: Mark 8:27-29 (NIV)

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Jesus asked this question of those who were following Him. It was when they were near the city of Caesarea Philippi, that's way in the north of Israel. As they were walking along, Jesus turns to them and asks this question: "Who do people say I am?"

Think about that. Who do people say Jesus is? What do you think most people today would say? I'm going to have you turn to your neighbor and share what you might guess to be the three top answers to this questions today. If you went and asked a random person in downtown Forest Lake, downtown Minneapolis, and downtown Beijing, what might you hear? Turn and share with your neighbor. No wrong answers. Just make your guess. Forest Lake, Minneapolis, Beijing. Go ahead. Share. [Pause.]

What are some of the answers you shared?

[Call out answers...]

Well, the disciples turned to Jesus and answered that in Israel, at that time, some people thought He may be John the Baptist, you know, that fiery preacher who told people to repent and turn to God. Other people, they reported, said that He may be Elijah, you know, that great prophet of God, doing God's work, doing miracles, and teaching about God.

Then Jesus asks that startling and very personal question. "OK. But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Think about that one. What would you answer?

After an awkward pause, Peter speaks up. “You are the Messiah.” You are the one sent of God to come and save God’s people.

Now even this isn’t a concrete answer. What does messiah mean? Is Jesus a military leader, a spiritual one, a philosophical one? Could mean a number of things. What kind of king?

This question is a question that Jesus didn’t just ask once to those around Him. It’s a question He asks to every person who comes near Him. It’s a question for us.

Who is this Jesus who was born at Christmas? What does He mean for me and my life?

We’re going to spend some time with this for a few weeks, asking this question. In the end, it’s a question only you can answer for yourself. So, as we try to do that, we need to explore some major issues that surround this question.

Today, we’re going to tackle two questions that people have been asking for a long time, and more intensely since the Enlightenment, since the 1700s, the time of John Wesley.

One is, 1) How do we know that Jesus actually existed? Was He just made up? And

2) Are the Gospels reasonably reliable accounts of Jesus’ life?

PP#3: Q1) How do we know that Jesus actually existed?

Image of the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum.

So, first question: How do we know that Jesus actually existed? This one isn’t too hard.

Most people—even followers of other religions, and even atheists—especially if those who have explored the historical records, conclude that Jesus was a real person: a Jew who lived in first century Palestine, and who was killed by the Romans. There is very little doubt about this.

What is the historical proof? Well, you must put this in context. Most individuals in the ancient world never had any specific historical evidence of their existence. Yet there is all kinds of evidence that people existed. Someone made these ruins.

But for specific records, they are nearly nonexistent for anyone. You would have a hard time proving with any hard historical accuracy that Socrates lived, or Buddah, or the person who oversaw the building of the great pyramids in Egypt. Poor Obama is having a time with his birth certificate. He’s in good company! Most records we have are people saying that other people existed. But that’s only hearsay.

And this is especially true in unimportant places like rural Israel. Historical records weren’t kept. Only 3% of the people could even read or write! So, we wouldn’t expect any records.

PP#4: Josephus (A.D. 37 - c. A.D. 100) *Antiquities*

“Now there arose at this time a source of further trouble in one Jesus, a wise man who performed surprising works, a teacher of men who gladly welcome strange things. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Gentiles. He was the so-called Christ. When Pilate, acting on information supplied by the chief men around us, condemned him to the cross, those who had attached themselves to him at first did not cease to cause trouble, and the tribe of Christians, which has taken this name from him is not extinct even today.”

Even so, there are two ancient non-biblical references to Jesus. One is by a Jewish historian, Josephus, who was writing about 50 years after Jesus’ death. He records there was a certain man named Jesus, a teacher and miracle worker, who was called the Christ, and who was crucified, but whose followers still continue.

The other is Tacitus (c. A.D. 55 - c. A.D. 117) (*Annals, book XV*), a senator and historian of Rome, who claims that Nero blamed the burning of Rome on Christians, who take their name from a certain man named Christ, whom Pontius Pilate put to death during the time of Tiberius.

But let's not skip over the New Testament of the Bible. There are 27 written documents from the first century, from 10 authors, all who claimed that Jesus was born, lived, and died. Some of these are from within 20 years of His death. Few scholars dispute the validity of these as historical documents. And so, 30 sources surviving from the first century claiming that Jesus actually existed, is shocking and overwhelming. Jesus is actually one of the most recorded people of the first century!

Then, there is the swelling witness of His followers throughout the Roman Empire, claiming to have remembered Him personally, or believe He was real. It's pretty conclusive.

So, few today would dispute He was a real person.

PP#5: Q1) How do we know that Jesus actually existed?

Q2) Are the Gospels reasonably reliable accounts of Jesus' life?

The more pressing question, however, is "Who is He?" Is Jesus really the Jesus we meet in the Gospels? The Gospels claim that He did all kinds of amazing miracles: walking on water, controlling the weather, healing the sick, raising the dead. They say He was killed but then walked out of the grave. Is this true? I mean, how many people have you met who did this? I can't even name this on one finger!

PP#6: *Images of Santa Claus, Paul Bunyan, and Jim Henry.*

Perhaps this person did live, but His reputation grew into legend. Kind of like our own Paul Bunyan. He was probably a real person, a logger who lived in Minnesota. But the claims that he was 16 ax-handles tall, and that he scooped out the 10,000 lakes, and dug the Mississippi River? These were legends attached to the real man. Same with St. Nicholas, and Jim Henry. But no one really believes all the tall tales.

And then, there are the claims, like in the *Di Vinci Code*, that the Church had a vested interest in making the man Jesus into a god so people would do whatever the church leaders said. It gave them power, and influence.

In the 1700s, during the Enlightenment, all legends and superstitions were challenged by critical thinking and reason. And they also went after Jesus. So, many Enlightenment thinkers separated the Jesus of the Church from the Historical Jesus. They wanted to go back and find out who Jesus the man really was.

PP#7: *Image of Thomas Jefferson and his The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, along with the quote:*

Conclusion:

"Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus, And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed."

One of these was Thomas Jefferson, the drafter of the *Declaration of Independence* and our third president. He claimed to be a follower of Jesus. He was an Episcopalian and a strong church member. But he struggled with supernatural accounts of the Gospels. They just didn't seem

reasonable. And in 1802, he took a King James Bible, and deleted all the references to supernatural accounts about Jesus. He then took what was left and published it as *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

The conclusion of this Jefferson Bible ends like this, “Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus, And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.”

For Thomas Jefferson, a self-proclaimed Christian and lover of Jesus, Jesus was only a natural man. There was nothing supernatural about Him.

During the 19th century, there were many more historical lives of Jesus published. There are well over 100 different ones in the Library of Congress. The claim boiled down to that Jesus was a great Jewish teacher in first-century Palestine, that people followed Him and His teachings, and that He died at the hands of the Romans.

PP#8: *Image of Albert Schweitzer holding an African child, and his book Quest of the Historical Jesus.*

This critique came to a head in a man named Albert Schweitzer. He was a brilliant scholar, theologian, teacher, medical doctor, classical pianist, brilliant man. He challenged all these claims that Jesus was just an ordinary man, in his famous book, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*. And his critique was that he noticed that each time, Jesus started to look a lot like the authors! They were applying to Jesus what they felt was legitimate and realistic. They cut out anything they didn’t agree with. So, they reduced Jesus to what they believed, rather than letting the story of Jesus challenge what they believed. They reduced it to what they determined, rather than letting it stretch them into something more. Jesus became the Jesus they expected.

We still do this, don’t we? Jesus for liberals looks like liberals. Jesus for conservatives looks like a conservative. If you believe that you ought to do good, then for you Jesus said it is most important to go do good. If you believe that you have to have a heart-felt conversion, then for you Jesus said it is most important to have a heart-felt conversion.

PP#9: *Image of Reza Aslan and her book Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*

Recently, Reza Aslan writes one of these books, called *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*” It held the number 1 spot on the New York Best Seller list for 3 weeks. Her claim seems to be the direct opposite. The Church, she said, wanted everyone to live by love and kindness. So, they took this failed self-claimed messiah named Jesus and created Him into the Christ of the Christian faith. He wasn’t necessarily a good person or said all the good teachings. They were written by the Church, and then attributed to Him, in order to make people want to love their enemy, turn the other cheek, and act as Good Samaritans.

So, which is it? Is Jesus just a person? Was He only a good teacher who said all those things? Or was He a person who actually didn’t say all those things? Or did He believe He was the Son of God due to insanity? Or was He the Savior the Gospels record He was? What He myth, madman, or Messiah? Do the Gospels portray a relatively reasonable account of who Jesus was?

PP#10: AD 30 Jesus crucified
 AD 50 Paul begins writing letters
 AD 70 Gospel of Mark
 AD 80 Gospels of Matthew and Luke
 AD 90 Gospel of John

Let's unpack a bit where the Gospels come from. Most scholars date the four of them between 40 and 60 years after Jesus' death. These four are the only ones from the first century. All the other published materials, the "recently discovered" writings, and all other gospels, come from the next century. Only these four come from the first century. Nearly all scholars agree with this.

Well, it was an oral culture. So, the deeds and teachings of Jesus were shared from person to person. Now, how were these kept reliable? Well, there were all those who knew Jesus personally. They were eyewitnesses to what had happened. Paul, too, is writing about Jesus, within 20 years of Jesus' death. And his letters were circulating, being read by people who knew Jesus.

Well, after a while, the people who knew Jesus started to die off.

This past Christmas, my brothers and I got together. And, as we do, we shared stories about our childhood, and about our parents. Family stories. Did you do that, too? Well, we were telling our kids about our father, who died 24 years ago. None of them ever met him. Well, my brother Joel was telling about one time when dad and mom were driving around town in Minot, North Dakota. After a bit, I had to jump in. "You got a detail wrong!" They were at the stop light and the other car drove up next to them. Dad was asleep in the passenger's side." My brother Mark backed me up. Joel relinquished, he said that detail was fuzzy, so he could be wrong. Perhaps he was making a good story better. But Mark and I kept it accurate.

Now, my mom has come to visit us, and I can ask her a few clarifying questions, too. Was dad actually asleep? Did his head bob around as you drove? Did the other drivers snicker at him?

Well, what will our kids say when we're all gone? How will the stories be kept true?

A couple of years ago, my sister Kathy sat my mother down and asked her to share the old memories and stories. Mom still remembered them, and Kathy wrote down all she dictated. They've been shared among the family, validated, and now are kept. Thankfully, my mother is still here to validate our questions.

PP#11: 4 BC - AD 30 Life of Jesus

AD 30-90 Oral tradition of eye witnesses

AD 30-40 Sayings, teachings, and stories of Jesus begin to be compiled

AD 40-50 "M," "Q," and "L" sources compiled (none survive)

AD 50 Gospel of Mark

AD 80 Gospels of Matthew and Luke

AD 90 Gospel of John

AD 110+ All other non-biblical writings

But this is what the early Church did. As the apostles and other people who knew Jesus personally started to die off, the stories, and His teachings were written down. There seems to be at least three early collections, which scholars call M, Q, and L. Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, seems to pull from a previous source, called Q, as well as from Peter's eye witness accounts. Then, Matthew and Luke, which came later, seems to quote from Mark certain sections nearly verbatim. So, it seems, each had a copy of Mark in front of them. Then, each also had a unique source, M for the one that Matthew used, and L for the one that Luke used. Same goes for the story of Paul in Acts and in Paul's writings. They are pulling from previous collected materials, and eye witness accounts.

Take a look at how Luke starts his Gospel, for example. He explains he's compiling from earlier sources and from eye-witnesses.

PP#12: Luke 1:1-4 (CEV)

1 Many people have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. 2 They wrote what we had been told by the ones who were there in the beginning and saw what happened. 3 So I made a careful study of everything and then decided to write and tell you exactly what took place. Honorable Theophilus, 4 I have done this to let you know the truth about what you have heard.

Reader: Luke 1:1-4 “Many people have tried to tell the story of what God has done among us. They wrote what we had been told by the ones who were there in the beginning and saw what happened. So I made a careful study of everything and then decided to write and tell you exactly what took place. Honorable Theophilus, I have done this to let you know the truth about what you have heard.”

My mother is here today. Her mind isn't quite as sharp as it was 40 years ago, and her body not as spry. But, if you talk with her, do you think she is a reasonably reliable source for how I was born? I'm 45 now. How about for my first five years as a child? Is she a credible source? She may not have every detail right, I think so! Well, I keep trying to say I was a perfect child. She disagrees with me, and so I then tell her she is too old to remember accurately. But then, her stories are confirmed by my two older sisters, who were 20 when I was born.

How about Luke? From what you have read, do you find him a reasonably reliable source? How about when you confer with Matthew, Mark, John and the rest of the Bible? How about when you consider that thousands upon thousands of eye witnesses were willing to die rather than deny that it was true? Is this a reasonably reliable source?

Fairly credible to me, but then again, masses have gotten details wrong. We will continue to work through this over the next few weeks. But the question also is how reasonable does it have to be for me to accept it? Do I have to understand it all, does it all have to make perfect logical sense?

When I read Thomas Jefferson's bible, there are part that excite me. But then there are parts that leave me flat. Especially the ending! If it all ends with Jesus still in the grave, then the bad guys win! This doesn't capture me. I really don't care about Him, then. He's just like Aristotle. Good teacher. I suppose I ought to read him sometime, and it might be helpful to live by it.

But I don't fall in love with Thomas Jefferson's Jesus. I don't want to live for Him. I don't want to give the Jesus that Reza Aslan describes, my life. I love the Jesus I meet in the Gospels. Do I have to have it all figured out?

I hope that if Thomas Jefferson came here with his shortened Bible, he would be welcome. You don't have to believe just like we proclaimed Jesus to be at Christmas in order to be here. Here is a place where you can try to figure it out. We all are. We are all at different places in our journeys with Jesus. What unites us is that we are all seeking to know Jesus better. Here at Forest Hills, we proclaim the truth and life of Jesus as Messiah. But to be here all you have to do is want more of Him. And we can keep working on that together.

Yesterday there was a crowd of people here for the Community Care food distribution. Not everyone here was a part of this church. Not everyone here may have been a Christian. But everyone here was excited about what people who claimed to follow Jesus were doing, and they wanted to be a part of it.

PP#13: *Image of Albert Schweitzer holding an African child.*

Albert Schweitzer, for as brilliant as he was, also struggled with who the Church said Jesus was. But he was excited about what the Church was moved by Jesus to be doing. And he wanted to be a part of it. And so he served children for 40 years in what is today Gabon, Africa.

In his famous book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* he writes about Jesus, "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

When we follow, then we learn who He is. That's what happened with the first disciples. They just chose to follow Him, and then they learned *as they did*, more of who Jesus was. Today, if you find this Jesus compelling, be willing to give Him a try. You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to want to get to know Him better. You just have to choose to start following Him. You just have to want to be a part of how His followers are serving in the world.

PP#14-15: John Wesley's Covenant Prayer for the Methodists:

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

So today, here in January, I'm going to invite you to pray with me a prayer John Wesley had the Methodists pray every new year. There is nothing in it about affirming exactly who Jesus is. In stead, it's all about giving yourself to Him, and letting Him do with you as He wants. If that is you, if you are wanting this, then join me in praying it together. I've left it in the old language, exactly as Wesley wrote it nearly 300 years ago. But its words are still so powerful.

Let's pray...

Trivia Questions for the beginning of the Service:

1. We learned that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. But He didn't grow up there. What was His home town? [Nazareth]
2. What is another English form of Jesus' Hebrew name? [Joshua]
3. What did Jesus learn as a trade profession? [Carpentry]
4. How long did Jesus preach and teach as a public minister? [3.5 years]
5. Where did Jesus live when He was a public minister? [Capernaum, a sea town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee]
6. Who was Jesus' best friend? [John the Apostle]
7. Did Jesus drink alcohol? [Yes!]
8. How old was Jesus when He died? [34]
9. What is Jesus' middle name? [Something that started with H? No! Jesus has no middle name. The phrase "Jesus H. Christ" probably comes from "Jesus *Holy* Christ."]