

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

Sermon #1: "The Humanity of Jesus"

Scripture: Mark 1:14-15 (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"

"The Humanity of Jesus"

"Your kingdom come, your will be done." - Matthew 6:10

"Jesus: Myth, Madman or Messiah" "The Humanity of Jesus"

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For our New Year's series, we're taking a closer look at who this Jesus is who was born at Christmas. Jesus is the reason for the season. OK, so, who is He, anyway? Why is He so special?

Here at FHUMC, we proclaimed Him to be God's Son, Savior of all people, Lord over everything. Wow. That's a pretty bold claim. How do you know that? Why should we believe that?

So, we're spending a few weeks asking the questions that thoughtful people ask, and not necessarily Christians. And the intention is, that by the end of this series, you will be able to answer a very important question. It is a question that Jesus once asked His followers. After asking "Who do *they* think I am?" He asked, "But who do *you* think I am?" This question Jesus still asks us.

So, this morning, we're going to tackle a number of questions that people have asked about Jesus being a real person, an actual human being. Next week we'll look at the claim that He was God. But today: was Jesus a real, normal, fully human person? Seven questions.

PP#2: The humanity of Jesus: *[Image of just Mary and the baby Jesus]*

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us')." -Matt 1:23

First question: If Jesus were born as a real baby, was his mother really a virgin? More than a virgin, without a male participating in any way? Scientifically asking, where did the other half of the genetic material come from? This sounds like a story made up after Jesus was born to make Him sound special. But we all know this just doesn't happen. It is just too inconceivable, pun intended!

Well, let's ask a first question first: do you have to believe in the virgin birth in order to be a Christian? The answer is no. If you struggle with this, it's OK. There have been many Christians who didn't profess this. Joseph didn't believe Mary when she told him. He needed an angel to help convince him. But there were lots of Christians, before the Gospels were written, like when Paul was preaching throughout Turkey, that never heard this story. Paul never mentions it. Mark, who probably wrote the first Gospel, doesn't even mention it. So, my guess is that not every early Christian even heard of it. So, it's OK to question, to wonder, to struggle. Just keep wanting more.

Now, for me, this is not much of an issue. I believe that God does miracles, and for me, this is one of them. God, who made everything to start with, can easily supply a missing part of a gnome. But the bigger question is why is the virgin birth important? Of all the things to share about Jesus, why did Matthew and Luke include this in their story of Jesus?

Remember the purpose of the Gospels. They were written and preserved not as a historic chronology, or even as a biography of Jesus. They include those things, but their purpose is to share what we need to know about Jesus in order to have the confidence, trust, faith, in Him, to follow Him as our Savior.

So, this virgin birth story is important, not because without it you can't be a Christian. It's shared because it tells us something about this child. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, *and they will call him Immanuel*' (which means 'God with us')." -Matt 1:23

The story of the virgin birth points to the unique relationship that Jesus has with the Father, and that Jesus is a unique person. This story is told to answer the question, How is it that Jesus is God? The virgin birth is how Jesus is not just an ordinary human.

God shows up in Jesus. This is God's answer to our aloneness. God shows up! He helps us. He's with us. He's one of us. But He is also NOT one of us, who comes to us to save us.

This story is not the only reason we believe that Jesus is God. John 14 is pretty clear! But it is part of the consistent biblical witness that Jesus is Emmanuel. He has a special birth story. It's pretty cool. But if you find it hard to believe, you'll probably find a lot of the Bible hard to believe. That's OK. Keep reading it. Keep praying to believe more. Follow Jesus anyway!

PP#3: The humanity of Jesus: *[Image of Jesus as a boy.]*

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?
2. What happened to Jesus' childhood?

"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the world would not have room for the books that would be written." -John 21:25

Second question: If Jesus grew up as a real boy, what happened to His childhood? We know so little about it. In fact, we only have one story, from Luke, when Jesus was 12. His parent lost Him...You know, I really find that kinda dramatic. Gabriel comes to Mary and says, "Blessed art thou for the Lord Almighty has chosen you to bear His one and only Son, the Savior of the world, and to be His mother as He grows up." Then, one time when He's twelve, she loses Him! Mary lost the Son of God! She's got to be frantic....what will His Father say? You think you have problems!

But they finally find Him in the temple, and He says, "You didn't lose me. I had to be here, in my Father's house." Again, Luke tells this story because it tells us something about who this Jesus is. Remember, the Gospels aren't biographies. They're proclamations. They proclaim what you need to know about Jesus to follow Him. There is a lot more that has not been written down. Just look at the very end of John's Gospel. "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the world would not have room for the books that would be written." -John 21:25

There's a lot that isn't recorded. And the disciples, remember, didn't meet Jesus until He was 30. They wondered the same thing, I suppose. So did later Christians. I'm sure stories circulated about His childhood. Well, by AD 150, some of the shared stories were being written down. There were dozens of gospels written about Jesus. The problem is, that as we look at them and compare them with the four we have from 100 years earlier, we get a very different picture of Jesus. For example, there's the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. It tells stories about when Jesus was between the ages of 5-12. One scene is Jesus making sparrows when He was playing in water. Then, Jesus brings them to life. Cute scene, right? Well, then, another boy comes and messes up the water and chases the sparrows away. Jesus, angry, curses the boy, and the boy withers and dies on the spot. Yikes!

In another story, when Jesus was five, another boy bonks into Jesus. Again, Jesus curses the boy and he withers and dies. Then, when that boy's parents come to complain to Mary and Joseph, Jesus makes them blind so they can't find His parents to tattle on Him.

Do you believe this? Jesus doesn't make people blind, He makes people see! This is not the Jesus of the earliest accounts. There's a reason they're not in the Bible. They were fabricated.

Bottom line, we just don't know anything more about Jesus' childhood. We don't need to in order to believe in Him.

PP#4: The humanity of Jesus: [*Image of Mary Magdalene and Jesus*]

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?
2. What happened to Jesus' childhood?
3. Was Jesus ever married?

Third question: was Jesus ever married? This idea was again made popular by Dan Brown in his historical fiction *The Di Vinci Code* a few years ago. In the book, Jesus married Mary Magdalene, but the church kept it a secret.

First question: why? What difference does it make if Jesus were married? Would that change anything? Not really. He just knew He was going to die, and that He would not make a good husband, so He didn't.

Second point: there is no indication before the fourth century that Jesus ever had any romantic relationships. By then, all kinds of wild claims started to be made. And these writings were preserved down in Egypt, which was a center of Gnosticism in the ancient world. Gnosticism claims that there is secret knowledge that you need to know in order to get to heaven. Part of the secret knowledge is that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. How would that help you get to heaven? Sounds to me like they were making up a lot of things! They may be interesting, but are they important? I don't see how.

Now, did Jesus have any romantic feelings? Sure! He was a real person. Did others have feelings for Him? Probably so. Maybe even Mary Magdalene. But simply put, there is no indication for 200 years that Jesus ever got married.

Some claim that it would have been odd for Jesus not to marry. I don't think so. Paul never married, and he was a highly regarded Pharisee. There were many others. It was not unheard of.

Bottom line, the earliest and most reliable accounts don't show Jesus married.

PP#5: The humanity of Jesus: [*Image of 1941 Sallman's Head of Christ painting.*]

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?
2. What happened to Jesus' childhood?
3. Was Jesus ever married?
4. What did Jesus look like?

"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him." -Isaiah 53:2

Next question people ask: What did Jesus look like?

Here is the most famous portrait of Jesus in America. It was painted in 1942 by Warner Sallman, who also painted Jesus praying in Gethsemane, and Jesus knocking at the heart's door. The holders of this copyright say it has been produced 500 million times. This is probably the image most of us think of when we imagine Jesus. White. Long brown hair. Blue eyes.

PP#6: *Image of a middle easterner, what Jesus probably looked like.*

But you know what? He probably didn't look much like this. Jesus was a middle eastern Jew. He looked like most other middle eastern Jews! He probably had black hair, dark skin, brown eyes. In fact, we have no written record of His appearance. But, as you may have guessed, by 100 years later, there are some written descriptions of His appearance. But Isaiah prophesied long before, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him." He was average! Nothing was recorded about His appearance.

PP#7: *A few images of Jesus from very diverse cultures.*

That was the point. He looked a lot like the people He lived among. He was one of them. We're supposed to see Him as one of us. So, if you're white, it's OK to think of Jesus as white. If you're Chinese, it's OK to see Him as Chinese. The Bible says the point is that He became like us. He became one of us.

In the Gospels, the term that Jesus uses for Himself—over 60 times—is "son of man." The Contemporary English Version renders it "the human one." He looks like an average person.

This is the other half of the meaning of the story of the virgin birth. Jesus is really *a person*. He was born as a baby, just like you. We call this the "incarnation" ("in the flesh"). Jesus puts flesh and bones to the character and heart and will of God.

PP#8: The humanity of Jesus: *[Image of Jesus teaching - Sermon on the Mount.]*

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?
 2. What happened to Jesus' childhood?
 3. Was Jesus ever married?
 4. What did Jesus look like?
 5. Did Jesus really say all that is in the Gospels?
- "Love your enemy" -Matthew 5:44

OK, you still with me? Three more questions. Did Jesus really say all that's in the Gospels? About 20 years ago there was a famous conference of theologians who met in Minneapolis, called "The Jesus Seminar." And all these learned people got together to vote on which saying of Jesus in the Bible were really said by Jesus. Their conclusion? Only 2%. Another 16% may have been something *like* Jesus said. But they concluded, by vote, that 82% of what was recorded in the Gospels as what Jesus said, really wasn't.

My question: How did they know? They could only based their voting on two things. One is the Gospels themselves. The Gospels are the only recordings of Jesus that survive from the first century. How could they know if it didn't sound like something Jesus would say? And if they believed parts of it were true and parts weren't, how do you know which parts?

The other factor that influenced their voting, then, was their own opinions of what Jesus ought to be like. Now again, this is vary dangerous. We all want Jesus to be the way we want Him to be. And we all try to make Jesus the way that seems reasonable to us. But in the end, doesn't that just make Jesus like how we are? And you know, the stuff we don't like, it's usually the stuff that really challenges us and calls us out of our comfort zone. It's the stuff *we need* in order to grow! Left to ourselves, we would vote against something we need just because we don't like it.

So, I can see no other option than that we're stuck with all of it, whether you like it or not. We can't pick what we want Jesus to say. We have to receive what the earliest and original witness tells us He said, whether we like it or not.

Now, you may wonder how accurate the Gospels accounts may be. But bottom line, this is what the Early Church handed to us. And I'm not so sure it's so important that each record is accurate like a direct quote. The early Church got the message, and passed it along. It's purpose is not to be a transcription. It's proclamation. It's sharing who Jesus is and His message. Our faith is not in the accuracy of the recording. We don't put our faith in a book. We put it in the real person of Jesus. It is His Spirit within us that confirms the truth of His message, not the grammatical accuracy of it's recording. I mean, does it really matter if Jesus said, "You cannot love both God and money," or if He said, "You cannot love both God and things"? We get the point, right? The message came through, loud and clear.

Further, there are differences among the Gospels themselves. Did some get it wrong? But again, remember their purpose. They proclaim who Jesus is. Each Gospel is written to a different context, proclaiming Jesus in a different setting. Same Jesus. Same message. Different contexts.

Ten years ago I was preaching the same sermon to three different churches on a Sunday morning. Each time it was a little different. I tailored it to the setting, to the people, tried to use examples that made sense to them. Same sermon. Same message. Different contexts.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all have parts that are very similar, and parts that are very different. But then there is John. John is very different. The first three have Jesus' parables. John doesn't record a single one. In stead, John lists all of Jesus' "I am" statements. "I am the vine, you are the branches." "I am the bread of life." "I am the living water." "I am the light of the world." The first three don't.

John focuses on having a personal relationship with Jesus. You have to put your trust in Him. You have to choose to follow Him. You have to believe.

The first three talk much more about doing. You live out your faith by how you treat others. Stories of the Good Samaritan, the Sermon on the Mount (love your enemy, turn the other cheek), giving food to the hungry. Very different pictures of Jesus. Which is right?

Well, they both are! You need it all! You need to believe, and you need to act. You need to love Jesus, and you need to love your neighbor. John by itself leads to a Christianity of just Jesus and you. Matthew by itself leads to a Christianity of busyness, of good works. That's why they are all included. You need it all.

We're stuck with all of it. We can't just take out the parts we don't like. We may not agree with everything, but we have to received it all, together. Taking only certain parts, doesn't work.

PP#9: The humanity of Jesus: [*Image of Nicodemus going away sad, or someone shocked at Jesus.*]

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?
2. What happened to Jesus' childhood?
3. Was Jesus ever married?
4. What did Jesus look like?
5. Did Jesus really say all that is in the Gospels?
6. What do we do with the hard sayings of Jesus?

"Anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." -Matt. 5:32

So then, what do we do with the hard things Jesus said? I mean, He said that if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. He said that if you look at a woman lustfully, you have committed

adultery. He said that you can only get a divorce in cases of adultery. He said don't save up money on earth. What do we do with all this?

Well, again, what is the purpose of the Gospels? They are to proclaim life. They are not a listing of all the rules we must follow. They show *a person* we must follow. Rules are good, Jesus said, if they lead us to life. Rules can also lead to death, if taken so legalistically!

Here's the key: *we shouldn't always take Jesus literally, but we should always take Him seriously*. When we see Jesus communicating, He is preaching and teaching like a prophet, not like a lawyer! A prophet challenges the problems and dangers of life, and so a prophet speaks in a challenging way, tackling the big ideas, not worrying about every possible exception. Don't work on the Sabbath. But if a man is sick, treat him! If your cow falls in a hole, get it out. And all the while, don't work on the Sabbath! If you have a hard time seeing around that, you're in danger of legalism! Keep the main point the main point. Train yourself to divert your eyes. Guard your lusts. Honor marriage. Don't live for money.

Jesus also speaks in hyperbole. "Goodness, Rebekah, you ALWAYS leave the door open! Really? She has never once closed a door? "Nathan, turn off the lights. You're killing me, here!" "Reese, I can't stay right now. I've got a million things to do before lunch."

Is adultery really the only grounds for divorce? I've told women in my office that as a Jesus follower, she needed to divorce her husband who is beating her.

We need to interpret Scripture with Scripture. Take each of the individual situations and hold them with others. Then you get the real meaning. *Never* talk to strangers? How about the rule to find an adult when you are in trouble? Don't store up treasures on earth? How about also provide for those in need? How do you do that if you don't save some money now and again to give away?

Ask, "What is the point, here? What is Jesus trying to communicate to me?"

And interpret Jesus' sayings by His actions. Don't get a divorce. But then we see Jesus talking to a woman at a well who has had five husbands. He didn't write her off. Instead, He commissions her to be a missionary to her own town.

Always take Jesus seriously, but He did not always intend to be taken literally. We follow a person, not a list of rules. Life is messy, and Jesus always guides the way through it.

PP#10: The humanity of Jesus: *[Image for the Kingdom of God]*

1. Was Jesus really born of a virgin?
2. What happened to Jesus' childhood?
3. Was Jesus ever married?
4. What did Jesus look like?
5. Did Jesus really say all that is in the Gospels?
6. What do we do with the hard sayings of Jesus?
7. What is Jesus' main message?

"Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," He said, "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news." -Mark 1:14-15

OK, final question as we wrestle with the humanity of Jesus: What was Jesus' main message? What was the central focus of Jesus' preaching and teaching? We could suggest, maybe, "God is love." or "Love God" or "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself" or "follow me." These are good and helpful. But if we take a closer look at the Gospels themselves, Jesus summarizes it for us. Mark 1:14-15, "After John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the

good news of God. “The time has come,” He said, “The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.”

Jesus’ main message, as recorded in the first three Gospels, is that the time is fulfilled. God’s kingdom is now near. So, repent and believe the good news.

God is King of all creation. But since the beginning, humanity has been in a state of rebellion against God. If you need any evidence of this, just look at history. If you need any more evidence, look at the headlines today. If you need any more evidence, look at your own heart. Evidence of the rebellion is everywhere: violence, addiction, poverty, bigotry, backbiting, bullying, materialism, self-centeredness, laziness, gossip, rebellion! The world is not the way God intends. It’s not the way it is supposed to be. There is the way it is, and then there is the way it is supposed to be. And so, here comes Jesus, preaching: the time is right. Repent. Stop behaving like the way it is. Start behaving the way it is supposed to be. When Jesus’ followers live differently, the Kingdom of God starts to become reality! Jesus gives the example of the mustard seed. It starts out small, but it grows. The people of God are called to be different.

My life is changed by my personal relationship with Jesus. I’m a different person than I used to be. But that change in me also changes the world around me. People who follow Jesus become the way that God’s kingdom comes near.

You are the only Gospel some people will read. You are the only Jesus some people will see. They will watch you to see if Jesus is real. Is the Jesus they see in you hurting people? Is that Jesus stuck on legalistic rule following? Is that Jesus only concerned about works...or only personal belief? Is that Jesus living differently than the world? Is that Jesus loving, forgiving, extending grace, caring about the folks in trouble, doing something to make a difference? When you live out this Jesus, incarnate, other people might become interested in your Jesus. In you, they’ll see that Jesus is real.

To close, I want to invite you to pray with me the prayer that Jesus taught His followers to pray. You’ll see, that it is a prayer all about the Kingdom of God coming on earth.

I have it up on the screens broken down in a way so you can see how it’s all about God’s Kingdom. Lets pray it the way it is printed, and let it shape who you are. Let’s pray:

PP#11: Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your Name.

Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For yours is the Kingdom, and the power and the Glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.