

“A Divine Incarnation”  
(sermon given 4/25/10 by Scott Jansen)  
John 10:22-38

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[Prayer for Illumination] Ever-present God, your Creative Spirit of love surrounds us, always. Empower us now to listen to your word with ears that hear. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray... Amen.

When you talk with people of different faiths, or of no faith at all, it's easier to get them to agree with basic Christian moral principles, than to reach agreement on the nature of Jesus Christ himself. And that was just as true when Jesus was still alive, as it is true today—according to the gospel of John.... Listen now, for God's word for you....

At that time, the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us... plainly." .....

Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works (that I do in my Father's name) testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand..... The Father and I are one."

.....The Jews took up stones again to stone him.

Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?"

The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being..., are making yourself God." .....

Jesus answered, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'????????? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods'—and the scripture cannot be annulled—can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son'??????????

If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

Amen. So ends the reading and may God add a blessing to our understanding.

I want to thank John Haugland for helping us to remember Earth Day. My son Brian is on the SEE team at RB, so I frequently hear about the Environment..., through his eyes. I'm always a little shocked at how little hope the younger generation has when it comes to the long-term health of the planet. We talked in Confirmation class recently how nearly every assigned book in high school features some variety of doomsday scenario. Nobody lives happily ever after anymore. Sometimes I think the schools prepare kids better to face a total collapse of human society, than to be a contributing agent in keeping our planet together....

For many high schoolers today, it would seem that to rejoice, or to hope in the future, strikes them as naïve or stupid; as if a hopeful attitude means you haven't been paying attention. It isn't "cool" anymore to get too excited about anything good in the world. The media doesn't talk about people helping one another—that's just not "news." Though there certainly is lots of buzz whenever people hate one another.

So, where should an intelligent, sensitive teenager today find hope? Does life have any ultimate meaning? Why bother trying to keep this world together? Is there any realistic chance of success? Things look... dreary, especially when the media so strongly prefers to display hatred, rather than love.

But imagine the teenagers in Jesus' day. They could not remember a time before the Roman occupation—they had been born in occupation. Every day, they walked on roads that were lined with relatives who had been crucified by the Romans. Why should they have hope? Why should they even think about a Messiah?

Before Jesus, many would-be Messiahs had risen up, stirred up some hope, challenged the Romans, and been crucified. So, why should they hope yet again in a Savior sent from God? Can't you empathize with their position when they ask Jesus to tell them plainly what he has in mind? "Forget all this high-sounding morality and

philosophy, Jesus—if you’re going to save us, get on with it already.”....

It’s hard to find hope in the grand vistas of life, when you’ve been beaten down every time you’ve tried to lift your head up out of your local mud puddle....

The salvation of the Jews from Roman oppression would take over three centuries, and it would be accomplished by changing hearts, rather than by changing who owned the weapons. But there were some who could not understand that complicated message, some who wanted to hear about salvation more “plainly.”

If you can’t express it in a thirty-second sound bite, if it doesn’t fit on a bumper sticker, then it just isn’t real—at least for some. Do we want our news that way? Do we want our hope to come to us “plainly”??? Or are we willing to look at a much, much, bigger picture????

Well, let me try to paint it as plainly as possible. To a high school student, the world may have little hope because there’s so much hatred, so much fighting. In most cases, the fighting is about limited resources amidst too many people. For example, in Palestine and Israel, there’s not enough water to irrigate crops and to satisfy the population. So they fight over land, but especially over water. There’s not enough water for so many people....

But why are they having so many children? Why is the world population growing so rapidly???? It grows rapidly wherever there is poverty and insecurity. When people feel like, no one will take care of me when I’m old, then, they have lots of kids. Someone has to bring me water from the well when I can’t carry it for myself. As long as people feel such insecurity, they will continue having lots of kids.

Americans tend to look at the poor of the world and say, “it’s all their fault.” If they would just stop having so many kids, we could stabilize everything.... And, of course, most of the world’s poor folks point to Americans and say, “it’s all their fault.” If they would just share more from their abundance so that I could feel materially secure, then I wouldn’t be forced to have so many kids.

And, as long as everyone is looking at somebody far far away and saying, “it’s all their fault—they need to change,” then, well, it is hard to find hope....

But, what if we looked at the world from God’s perspective? Rather than seeing divisions and little groups, what if we saw the whole world as one big family—with everyone taking a serious

interest in the needs of everyone else? Could that really save us from the current path of planetary destruction????

Of course, there are many reasons why people don't get along, why they divide into groups and refuse to associate with others. One of those reasons is religion. And we see that in our reading this morning. One of the things that separated people in Jesus' day was their understanding of exactly who Jesus was. To some, he was a blasphemer, claiming to be God, though he was only a human being.

This same issue is still a huge barrier among people today. Christians have been divided over the nature of Jesus since the first Easter Sunday. There has never been a time when all folks who consider themselves Christians have agreed on who Jesus was.

So, I think it's instructive to look at his answer when he heard this question. He did not seek to use the issue to create barriers or divisions. He tried to bring people together, even though they had disagreements. Let's look carefully at his reply.

In verse 33, he is accused of blasphemy because he is only a human being, but he is claiming to be God. And we can all imagine a response that would have built even higher walls between peoples, a response that would foster divisions. He could have said, "yep, I am God, and if you don't believe it, you're just wrong."

But, that's not what he said. Instead he said, Look at your own scriptures. Look at Psalm 82, verse six. Does it not quote God as declaring, "I said, you are Gods?" The Biblical authors, the human beings who received inspiration and wrote down the words of their understanding, they were referred to, in scripture, as..... "Gods."

Now, let's back up a step. How can all of those folks be Gods? Isn't this a monotheistic religion? Well, it's not that simple—language changes. In the early days of Hebrew, it was common to refer to people as gods. In fact, the early Hebrew word, Elohim, that we often translate as God, is also sometimes translated as "mighty warrior." It's the same Hebrew word. In English translations, you might read that Saul was a mighty warrior, and then a little later you might read that Saul prayed to God. But in Hebrew, it's the same word—Saul was an Elohim, and Saul prayed to Elohim.... This same phenomenon applies to our English word "Lord." As late as two centuries ago, it was quite common to refer to a human being as "my Lord."

So, when Psalm 82 refers to Biblical authors as "gods....," that word can have different meanings. But let's get back to Christ's

answer, here. He says to the Jews, you all have scriptures that use the label “god” for human beings in several spots. So why should it be blasphemy for me to call myself a “Son of God?” All the Hebrew children, all the citizens of Israel, were occasionally called “sons and daughters of God” in the Bible. So, how can this be blasphemy—this claim I’m making is no big deal.????

Jesus did not want our various understandings of him to become a stumbling block for us—a cause for divisions. He said to the Jews, it doesn’t matter if you believe the claim about me. All that matters is that you believe the works that I do in God’s name. If you believe the works, then, you will understand. Then you will know what I mean when I say that God is in me, and I am in God....

Ok. So, let’s take this paragraph apart. What does it mean to “believe” in some “works?????” We have a group of RPC members going to Rockford to build a Habitat Home in June. Do you believe that? If I call the local newspaper and show them pictures, they might believe that. Maybe. With photoshop nowadays, you never know. But they wouldn’t print the story. Because believing in the works isn’t merely a matter of facts and evidence. What Jesus means here is, “the Spirit of God is really the instigator behind these works.” Thus, you might believe that a group of RPC folks will go build a Habitat Home soon, but it’s another thing altogether to believe that the reason they are going is because the Spirit of the Living God is actively orchestrating their activities.

Likewise, you can believe what Jesus did—that he broke down barriers between peoples, that he healed the sick, clothed the naked, that he taught important lessons. But it’s another thing altogether to believe that it was the Spirit of God who was orchestrating those deeds. You have to really BELIEVE in the works in order to understand how God was in Jesus, and Jesus was in God. God was working within the heart of Jesus, and Jesus’ work was done within the realm of God.

Jesus tells us that if you believe in the works correctly, then you will also understand what he means when he says that he is “Son of God.”...

And this advice that Jesus gives us is critically important to the way that we do evangelism. Rather than starting with intellectual arguments about the nature of Jesus and his relationship with the Creator, perhaps we should start with what Jesus advised us to start with. Convince people that the works done in the name of Jesus

really are works that can be believed in—not just as journalistic facts, but as works that are being orchestrated by the Spirit of the Living God. And if people will come to believe in the works, then they will eventually formulate a correct understanding of just who Jesus was.

Jesus refers to his disciples as his “sheep” and says that the true sheep are the ones who follow him—who live the way he lived. Now, his disciples did follow him, and they did live as he lived, and they practiced what he preached. But they did not understand who he was. The Bible is bursting with examples of how the disciples did not have a correct understanding of who Jesus was. Yet, he refers to them as his disciples, his sheep, who have already gained salvation—not because they have a correct understanding of Jesus. They only knew his works. But they believed in his works. And... a correct understanding of Jesus followed—maybe it took a little while, but eventually they got it.

And this message is particularly apt for Earth Day, because we make a mistake when we box God in to some tiny little corner of the universe and imagine that God is there..., up there..., far away... in Heaven.... When we think that way, then we often imagine that this planet is just a temporary garbage heap that we can use up and leave behind.

But if, instead, we thought of God as everywhere—that God was in Jesus and Jesus was in God, just as Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus, just as God is in us and we are in God—then, we can recognize the divine all around us. Every tree, every rock, every tadpole, every worm—God is there also. So, when we honor the unique life forces in all of those things, we are honoring the Creator as well—even if we may not always remember that consciously.

So, who was Jesus the Christ? Blasphemer? Or God? Or something else? Well, if you look at the works that he did, and if you understand how God was connected to those works, and if you follow Jesus in doing similar works, then, like the disciples, you will eventually understand.

Amen.