



WHO, PRECISELY, IS THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS? MARK 6:45-52

DEC 15, 2024
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Two weeks ago, on December 1, I spoke to you on the first Sunday of Advent and asked the question: What was the purpose for which God sent his Son into this world? It's simply another way of asking, What is the true meaning of Christmas? Christmas, we concluded, was designed by God to save sinners. If you were here you may remember how I summed it up: The love of God sent the Son of God to endure and exhaust in himself the wrath of God so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we might become the children of God.

Today, I want to continue that theme by asking, precisely who is the Christ of Christmas? It's one thing for us to understand and celebrate that God has made provision for our salvation by the sending of Christ to die for us, and thereby save us, but precisely who is this Christ whom we celebrate? If you and I don't answer that question in accordance with Scripture, we might find ourselves putting our faith and our hope for eternal life in someone who can't save.

Every year, Ligonier Ministries in Florida conducts their annual theological survey among professing Christians. The most recent results that I saw were shocking and disturbing.

30% of professing Christians do not believe that God is perfect and cannot make a mistake. 43% believe that Jesus sinned, just like the rest of us. Nearly 60% do not believe the Holy Spirit is a person but rather a force or impersonal power. 66% believe that God accepts the worship of all religions, even Islam. But one statistic in particular was not only alarming but relates directly to the answer to my question today. ***57% of professing Christians believe that Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God. Only 20% disagree and 15% aren't sure.*** In other words, ***72% of professing Christians either believe that Jesus was himself created or aren't sure.*** That is simply staggering.

Let that sink in for a moment. More than 2 out of every 3 of those surveyed think that Jesus is a creature, a person who at one time did not exist. Although he is regarded by these people as the "greatest being created by God," he is, nevertheless, only a created being. In other words, he is not eternal; he is not self-existent; he is finite; and by definition he cannot be God, because God is the Creator and not the one who is created.

As you probably know, the answers given by many to the question of the identity of Jesus vary greatly. All you need to recognize this is to answer your doorbell! I suspect that all of you, at some time or other, perhaps repeatedly, have had visitors show up on your doorstep trying to push upon you their beliefs about who Jesus is.

For example, those good-looking, clean-cut young men in white shirts riding on bicycles will tell you that the Mormon church believes Jesus was the first-born child of Elohim, the product of the physical union between the Father God and the Virgin Mary. For a time, God and Mary were husband and wife, and they had sexual relations and conceived Jesus. For them, Jesus is not the eternally pre-existent second person of the Trinity. Thus, the debate over whether Mormons are Christians begins and ends right there: No, they are not.

If not Mormons, then Jehovah's Witnesses will likely show up at your front door. Ask them who Jesus is and, if they are honest, they will say something along these lines: "Before he came to this earth, Jesus was Michael, the archangel! He's only a creature, the first product of Jehovah God's creative work. When he was born of the virgin Mary he was divested of his spiritual, angelic nature and became wholly and exclusively a man. Jesus isn't God."

It is doubtful that a Muslim will ever turn up at your door, but if you should ever engage one in conversation, he/she will tell you that Jesus was just like Abraham and Moses and Isaiah. He was a prophet of God. But he wasn't himself God. Mohammed, who lived 500 years after Jesus, was God's greatest prophet. Besides, Jesus didn't really die on the cross, as Christians believe. He was rescued by God at the last minute and carried to a safe place in the heavens. Since there was no death on the cross, there was no atonement for sin. And since there was no death there was no resurrection.

The group known as the Moonies aren't seen or heard from much anymore. But if you should encounter one along the way he will tell you that Jesus was the illegitimate child of an adulterous sexual relationship between Mary and

Zacharias, the husband of her cousin, Elizabeth. Jesus failed to establish the perfect family on earth, so God has sent to us his second Messiah to carry on the work. His name is Rev. Sun Myung Moon. I must confess I don't know what they believe anymore, given the fact that the Reverend Moon died, and as far as I can tell, no claims have been issued asserting his bodily resurrection.

So, I ask you again: Who, precisely, is the Christ of Christmas? And what is your relationship to him? How do you feel about him? Do you love him, fear him, trust him, or doubt him?

Bernard of Clairvaux, born in 1091, was probably the greatest and most godly of all medieval mystics, in spite of the fact that most of you have probably never heard of him. Some of you who grew up in churches that typically sang traditional hymns may remember that it was Bernard who wrote the words:

"Jesus, the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest."

I realize those words sound a bit dated and more than a little cheesy to some of you, but stay with me as I use them to make a point. "Jesus, the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast." One is forced to admit that the sentiment expressed in this line from Bernard's hymn has not been the experience of everyone. I suspect that King Herod the Great, might have said: "Jesus, the very thought of Thee, with intense fear and rage fills my breast." Herod was terrified that a rival king might lead a political rebellion against his rule in Judea. So, he issued an order to have all the infant boys in Bethlehem, two years and younger, to be slaughtered.

Or perhaps the Pharisees might have said: "Jesus, the very thought of Thee, with indignation fills my breast." Understandably so, as Jesus was a threat to the stature and spiritual power of the religious leaders of that day.

The fact is, everywhere Jesus went he stirred up in people widely divergent responses. Whether love or hate, fear or faith, joy or dread, no one remains neutral when they see Jesus or hear him speak or wrestle with the claims he made. To Herod he was a political threat, to the Pharisees a religious menace, to many an average man in those days he was just another street magician. But to those who followed him then, and I hope to you as well today, he was and is Master, Lord, God incarnate.

So I ask once again, Who is the Christ of Christmas? To use Bernard's words, with what is your heart filled at the very thought of him. Indifference? Rage? Intimidation? Confusion? Mystery? Joy? Fear? Love?

Setting the Context

If we had time, I would have you look at the paragraph that precedes the one we are studying today. There we would see how the people of the first century reacted when they thought of Jesus. They just watched as he fed 20,000 people with a handful of loaves and a few fish and said to themselves: "Finally, the King we've been looking for, a man of power, a military hero who can lead us in revolt against Rome. Grab him. Put a sword in one hand and a scepter in the other and let's march against our oppressors!"

In our text today, we are confronted yet again with Jesus: with a remarkable event, with an unmistakable utterance, with a stunning claim on his part, all of which demands from each of us a response: at the thought of this Jesus, what fills your breast? Or to put it in more contemporary terms: ***"Who the heck is this guy?"***

You may think this is an odd passage to be looking at during Advent, but I want to argue that there is hardly a better place for us to dwell than right here, asking the question once again: Who precisely is the Christ of Christmas. Contrary to the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Muslims and the Moonies, and contrary to what so many in our world today would suggest, the Christ of Christmas is God in human flesh. Any answer other than this will leave us in our sin and destined for eternal damnation

We are told in v. 45 that "immediately" following the feeding of the 20,000 or so he dismissed the entire crowd and "made" or literally "compelled" his disciples to get into a boat and row to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Why?

Well, for one reason he wanted to be alone so he could pray. But pray about what? Mark doesn't tell us, but I think John in his gospel does, at least by implication. John tells us in his gospel that Jesus discovered the people "were about to come and take him by force to make him king" (John 6:15).

We know that after the temptation in the wilderness the Devil "departed from him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). *Perhaps Satan had now returned and pressed upon Jesus the temptation to ascend to political power and to enjoy its many pleasures and perks.* Don't think for a moment that Jesus wasn't tempted by the allure of political influence. Hebrews tells us that he was tempted in all things as we are. The only difference is that he didn't sin. He never succumbed. Why? One reason has to be because when such temptation came his way, he retreated into the mountains alone and prayed: I suspect, he prayed: "O Father, strengthen me to resist this appeal. Give me wisdom and power and energy in my heart and will to stay true to the calling you've placed upon me. Don't let me give in for a moment to what these people are offering."

I think this also explains why he "made" or "compelled" the disciples to get in the boat and leave. He knew they were tempted in this way as well. You can almost hear the disciples say to themselves:

"Well, it's about time Jesus got the recognition he deserves! Power and prestige are long overdue! And didn't Jesus tell us to pray, 'Thy kingdom come'? Well, this seems like a great time for just that. And if Jesus is propelled into political office, we'll be there with him to share the limelight. If he's King, I guess we'll be princes. We'll sit on his right and on his left. People will honor us and bow in our presence. We've suffered with him long enough. We deserve some of the perks that ought to come with self-sacrifice and the ridicule we've endured."

I have a sneaking suspicion that Jesus sent them away to protect them from the power of that temptation. They may have been his disciples, but they were just as susceptible to the appeal of power and worldly pleasure as anyone.

Although Jesus was safely hidden in his mountain prayer retreat, the disciples once again found themselves in trouble on the Sea of Galilee. John tells us (John 6:19) that they had rowed about 3 or 4 miles, which means they were smack dab in the middle of the Sea. The wind was in their face and they weren't making much headway. It was the fourth watch of the night (v. 48), that is to say, sometime between 3 and 6 a.m. Clearly, then, they had been battling this headwind for as many as nine hours and had barely made any progress.

I'm struck at how often in the gospel record we see Jesus showing up at a time that most people would consider "too late". He seems to delay his arrival and the provision of help for no apparent reason. The most obvious was his decision in John 11 to delay his visit to see Lazarus who was ill. He waited four days, during which time Lazarus died. Earlier in chapter six of Mark's gospel, he didn't show up at all when John was thrown in prison and eventually beheaded. And now his closest friends are undoubtedly exhausted and frightened and he waits nine hours or so before taking any action. What's the deal? Couldn't he have taken a break from his prayer retreat to help them?

It causes me to wonder about the apparent "delay" of Jesus in our lives. When we need him most, *he seems to take his sweet time in showing up!* But Jesus had not forgotten them. He hadn't forgotten Lazarus. And he hasn't forgotten you. That doesn't mean he's always going to show up and do what you think needs to be done. But he will always show up and do what is ultimately best for those whom he loves.

So here he comes, walking on the water, taking an early stroll on the Sea. *Not "by" the Sea, but "on" the Sea.* Liberal skeptics scoff at the story: He only stood in the shallow water at the shore's edge. But Mark says otherwise: they were in the middle of the Sea and he came walking upon it (vv. 47-48). Others insist he walked on a sand bar barely submerged beneath the surface of the water.

I remember many years ago a noted exponent of eastern meditation and yoga claimed he could walk on water. The event took place in Bombay, India, where hundreds of people paid a high price to watch him do it. He prepared himself for the miracle by swallowing what he said were steel tacks and nitric acid and walking on hot embers. He then walked up to the tank filled with water, placed a foot on the surface, and immediately sank to the bottom. Angry spectators demanded their money back. The guru explained that earlier in the week he had slipped and injured

himself which made it impossible for him to achieve a state of levitation. He invited everyone to come back in a couple of weeks for a repeat performance, but I never heard if anyone took him up on the offer!

In a national magazine about the same time, there was a cartoon of a man walking on the water in a swimming pool of a luxury hotel, hands outstretched, balancing himself. The caption under the cartoon came from a person sitting in a beach chair beneath an umbrella. He turns to his friend next to him and says: "Wow. It's been years since that's been done really well!"

What do we say to the person, perhaps you, who says: "But this is physically impossible. Water does not possess the solidity necessary to sustain a human body. Everyone knows this."

In anticipation of this objection, I did a little research on the physical properties of water. And by that I mean research beyond the fact that water consists of two hydrogen atoms bound to one oxygen atom. I read about things like Molar mass and surface tension and heat capacity and dielectric constant and viscosity and density and relative permittivity and index of refraction relative to air. And I must confess to you that I didn't understand a single syllable of any of it! Those of you more scientifically trained understand these terms. I don't.

But here's what I do understand, at least in a small part. When I hear of these chemical and physical properties of water and of what it can and cannot do and how it is used and how, as one author put, "water is the 'mother' and 'matrix' of all life," I asked the simple question: Why? Why is water made up of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom? Why do they sustain the relationship to each other that they do? Why does water freeze at 32 degrees F? Why does it boil at 212 degrees F? Why does it exist in three forms: liquid, solid, and gas?

I suppose some of you may think those are silly questions. The answer, so you would tell me is: "Well, water freezes at 32 degrees because that's the way the physical and chemical laws operate." Yes, I understand, but ***why do they operate in this way?*** What accounts for why the laws of physics are what they are and chemical compounds function in the way they do and why the various elements in the natural realm interact and react in the manner that we observe? It isn't enough simply to say: "Well, because that's the way they are. That's the way it has always been, and a law of physics is a law of physics is a law of physics."

But why is each law of physics what it is and not otherwise? My point is simply ***that water is what it is and functions the way it does because that is the will of the self-existent, eternal, all-powerful Creator who made it and ordained that the laws of physics and chemical reactions be such as they are. And that Creator, so we are told in John 1 and Colossians 1, is none other than the Christ of Christmas.***

And if the Christ of Christmas chooses to suspend himself on the surface of a body of water without sinking, I don't even blink an eye or lose a breath. He is the Lord over every quark and proton and electron and atom and molecule in the universe and they do his bidding every nano-second of every day. Water freezes at 32 degrees F because water's Creator and Lord ordained that it should possess physical properties that react in a particular way to the precise temperature that he also ordained.

If God should choose to utilize water in a way contrary to its normal function and in defiance of its normal properties, that is his prerogative and power as water's Creator and Providential Lord. The only reason why water always freezes at a particular temperature and always boils at a particular temperature and always vaporizes at a particular temperature and cannot normally sustain the weight of a human being who seeks to stand upon it is because ***the Christ of Christmas so wills.*** And if the Christ of Christmas wills to walk upon it, who am I to question or doubt him, especially given the fact that I am what I am and have a brain to think the way I do and continue to breathe moment-by-moment only because God so wills!

But we come now to the most amazing and, to be honest, one of the more baffling things Mark says anywhere in his gospel record. Look again at ***the second half of v. 48.***

"he came to them" (understandably so, since it seems his purpose would have been to help them in the middle of this storm) and *"he meant to pass by them"*

OK, which is it?

Describe how we “pass by” people all the time because we don’t want to talk to them or make eye contact; so we try to slip by without being noticed (head down or turned away or perhaps faking being occupied with something or someone else). We try to slip in and quickly out of a room filled with people, hoping no one will notice. Is that what Jesus is doing? Did he get out on the sea and suddenly change his mind, saying to himself: “I think I’ll leave them to themselves. They got into this mess; they can get themselves out of it.”

No! There is something profoundly glorious in what is happening here. There is something deeply spiritual and eternally significant in the fact that Jesus walked on the water and the way he intended to “pass by” the disciples and also in what he said to them when they freaked out. Look closely with me.

First of all, these men were steeped in the OT. They lived and breathed the Scriptures. They knew from childhood that in the OT Scriptures **only God walked on water!** We read in Job 9:8 that God “alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea.” In Job 38:16 God asks Job, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep?” The psalmist declares of God, “Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen” (Ps. 77:19).

In walking on the water Jesus is doing what only God can do. He is saying to them, again, to use Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous words: “Guys, does the very thought of me walking on water fill your breast with wonder and awe that you are in the presence of God?” It should.

Second, as if that weren’t enough, the words translated “pass by” are rich in meaning when we look at how they are used in the OT.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.’ Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory.’ And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and you will proclaim my name “The Lord.” . . . And the Lord said, ‘Behold there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by’” (Exod. 33:17-19a, 21-22; cf. Exod. 34:5-8).

In saying that Jesus walked upon the water and intended to “pass by” the **disciples, Mark isn’t saying he wanted to sneak past them unnoticed. He intended to be seen! He intended to be revealed!** He intended to be disclosed in the most marvelous and glorious way as the very God who “passed by” Moses in Exodus and was made known as the one true God, the great and majestic Creator of all mankind!

Third, as if that weren’t enough, Jesus doesn’t simply do what God does in “passing by” as he walks upon the water. Notice that he also speaks and in doing so claims to be God in unmistakable, breathtaking terms. “But Sam, where does he do that? All he says is, ‘Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid’” (v. 50).

We hear in these words of Jesus an echo of Exodus 3:13-15 – “Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘**I am** has sent me to you.”

The Greek (*egō eimi*) behind the English “It is I” could easily be rendered: “**I am!**”! Jesus is saying, “Men, women, young and old, of every race and tribe and people and nation; hear what I’m saying: The great and awesome and eternally holy Yahweh of the OT is now before you in human flesh! **I am the I am!**” In Jesus of Nazareth we come face to face with the God of Israel, now in human flesh. The Creator and Redeemer God who made himself known to Moses in causing his glory to “pass by” is now “passing by” yet again in the person of Jesus! The great and glorious “I am” of Exodus, the God who declared, “When the people of Israel ask you who sent Moses to set us free; when Pharaoh asks who is this God who demands that his people be set free from bondage, tell them that “I am who I am” has sent you.” This I am is now present in the person of Jesus! This is the Christ of Christmas!

And what was their reaction? Initially they thought it was a ghost! The word translated "ghost" = *phantasma*, from which we get the words "phantasm" and "phantom." I can understand this, at least to a point. It was dark. The mist from the wind and waves and their obvious fatigue from rowing all night easily explain their failure to recognize Jesus. But once Jesus got into the boat and the wind ceased, "they were **utterly astounded**" (v. 51). Amazing! It's Jesus! And once again he shows up and nature bows in his presence. The wind obeys its Creator and Lord!

Mark tells us that the reason for their amazement is that they still didn't fully understand what had happened with the loaves and fish. They still didn't grasp the depths of what that miracle said about who Jesus really is. They were still somewhat hard of heart and thus resistant to the claim that Jesus was making for himself. We must never lose sight of the fact that the disciples grew in their understanding of who Jesus was. They didn't launch out following him with a full-blown and comprehensive grasp of who he was and what he was doing. It came in stages. It was a process, as it is for all of us.

But the good news is that when we read Matthew's version of this story, we discover that in this movement from initial hardness and blindness on to amazement and still a measure of confusion they eventually come to terms with what has just happened. Matthew's version of the story indicates that their fear and doubt and uncertainty eventually gave way to worship: "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God'" (14:33). That was their response. What is yours?

I suspect that you are much like Peter. Let me explain. Mark omits one major incident in this story: that of Peter joining Jesus on the sea. We don't know why Mark chose not to include this dimension of the story, but it is interesting to speculate given the fact that Mark records Peter's perspective on the life of Jesus. Peter may have had his reasons for asking Mark not to include it. But we can't know for sure.

In any case, Matthew tells us that Peter "got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus" (Matt. 14:29). It seems Peter is portrayed positively in that he refuses to do anything or take the first step until Jesus gives direct instruction. "If" (v. 28) = "Since" – Peter may have been impetuous at times but he's not so stupid as to jump out of a boat in the midst of a storm to join an unidentified ghost!

Peter did some things for which he is justifiably criticized, but sometimes in the midst of his fault is a remarkable faith struggling to exert itself. He denied Jesus in the courtyard, but at least he was there! Where were the others? On the Mount of Transfiguration, he stuck his foot in his mouth, but his intentions were good. When he resisted Jesus' attempt to wash his feet, it wasn't from self-righteous arrogance but from deep humility that felt itself unworthy of Jesus doing this.

How should we interpret and evaluate Peter's faith? Is Peter portrayed as an example of a foolhardy man who took a silly risk just to impress others? Or was this simply a childish search for a thrill? Or is Peter's request an example of testing God that is prohibited? I'm inclined to believe that Peter was moved to ask this of Jesus for one simple reason: he wanted to be with his Lord. As comforting and safe as being in the boat may appear to the natural mind, being with Jesus was better still.

You've no doubt heard it said by others that it was safer to be out of the boat and on the water so long as you are with Jesus than it is to be in the boat and out of the water and away from Jesus.

But what's the most important lesson to learn here? It is simply this: adversity and trials and the threat of harm, whether from nature or other people, all have a tendency to paralyze us and take our eyes off Jesus and who he is and what he can do in the worst of circumstances. That was certainly true in Peter's experience. He allowed the power of the storm to cloud his confidence in the power of the savior. His physical senses told him one thing, namely, "You're in danger! Be afraid!" His faith in Jesus told him another: "If Jesus says you can walk on the water, you can walk on the water." The moment Peter took his eyes off of Jesus all he could see was the danger surrounding him.

What's the answer? What's the lesson? Look at Jesus! See Jesus! Know Jesus! He is the Christ of Christmas! Bernard of Clairvaux was right:

"Jesus the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills my breast;

But sweeter far Thy face to see, and in Thy presence rest."

Can you say that today?