

IN DISGUISE

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Exodus 3:13-15
John 8:48-59

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In John chapter 8, we find Jesus and the Pharisees slugging it out, proving that holy men can insult each other as brilliantly as anyone. Jesus tells them that they are illegitimate, lying children, born of the devil, who will die in their sins. They tell Jesus that he is a suicidal Samaritan possessed by a demon. This bantering back and forth goes on for a while, but finally the Jewish leaders cut to the bottom line and ask Jesus, "Who do you claim to be?" (John 8:53) In other words, "Who are you really?" They are trying to determine whether he is an actual blasphemer or just a kook. Jesus does not directly answer their question, because it is not yet time for him to reveal his true identity to the world. God has plans for how that full revelation will be accomplished, and the time is not yet.

However, Jesus does make it very clear that he has an intimate relationship with God, and he is fully committed to the keeping of God's Word and fulfilling God's purposes. These statements in and of themselves were basically fine; they expressed a basic understanding of faithfulness that listeners of that day could get their minds around. But then Jesus says something much more startling – something that was much more difficult for them to get their minds around it. Jesus suggests to those Jewish leaders and any others who were standing close enough to hear that he also knows Abraham - Abraham, who died a couple thousand years before Jesus was ever born! This statement would have increased Jesus' "kook" potential in the eyes of the Pharisees, but it also raised serious questions. Is Jesus actually suggesting that he operates outside time and space, that he inhabits the reaches of eternity? There is only One who does that, so who does this guy think he is? Well, Jesus does not leave them in suspense for long. He says, "...before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58) And the immediate response to that statement was to reach down to pick up rocks.

It's not actually the part about Abraham that finally puts the Jewish leaders over the edge – that part could be attributed to craziness. It is the name that Jesus insists on using for himself that puts them over the edge. It is a name that no one uses, that no one even dares to say out loud because it is so holy. "I am," says Jesus, and he is not just mixing his verb tenses. He knows exactly what he is saying.

"I AM WHO I AM," (Exodus 3:14) God announced to Moses from the burning bush. "I am," Jesus echoes. How dare he? That is what his opponents want to know. How dare he trespass on that sacred name as if he had any claim to it at all? Before Abraham was, I am," says Jesus, and they picked up rocks not to scare him, but to kill him for blasphemy.

This passage from the Gospel of John is one of those scriptural accounts that reminds us how few choices we have when it comes down to deciding who Jesus really is. In his book [The Case for Christianity](#), C. S. Lewis declares, "Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God..."

When you look at it like that, it is not hard to have some sympathy for those first century human beings who had to decide who he was when they actually had so little to go on. Think about it. They had no resurrection stories to refer to, no New

Testament to read. They had no lovely Christmas carols and Easter Sunrise triumph hymns to fall back on. All they had were some prophecies that could be interpreted and understood in several different ways, and they had a first commandment that was written on their hearts in big capital letters that said, "YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME." (Exodus 20:3)

That was what they had been taught all their lives. That was the law laid down for them by the one God, who claimed to be a jealous God and who would not hesitate to prove it. Then along comes a man who challenges all of that, daring them to believe that he too is God, of one being with the Father who has sent him.

There are those of us who like to think that we could walk right into any room and pick out Jesus, and that there is something wrong with anyone else who can't. But could it be that all we really have going for us is hindsight. We know who Jesus turned out to be. We grew up singing "Jesus loves me, this I know..." but what if we did not know? What if we, like those Jewish leaders of that day, couldn't see God's Son because he didn't look anything like we expected. What if a rather strange man were to stand up in church today and say, "You are so far off track and you don't even know it. By the way, my name is 'I am.' I have come from before time to remind you of who you are. I have come from heaven to show you the way home." When he turned around and walked out the door, how many of us would follow?

I guess it's not a fair question, because we cannot give back what we already know, but this hindsight business is true. You can never see the shape of the mountain while you are heaving yourself over it. It is only afterwards, looking at it from a distance down in the valley, that you can see where you have been. Jesus knew the very same thing was true about the religious life as well.

"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he." (John 8:28) After you have strung me up, after you have watched me die, after you have come looking for my body and cannot find it anywhere, then you will know who I am. You will recognize me for who I truly am when I am gone.

As far as I can tell, Jesus is still the elusive stranger. Sometimes it is possible to identify him immediately, but much of the time you only know him after he is gone. Like the elderly man who wants to talk, who wants to tell you his story only you do not have the time, so you walk away. Or the woman with the tear-stained face who disappears while you decide whether to ask her what is wrong, and if you can help. Or the bewildered child whose mother yells at him while scolding him for being alive and whose sorrowful eyes catch yours as she drags him into the car. Or the hungry African child whose faces we see on a poster or a sponsorship commercial, who we so easily pass over without a second thought for their tragic lives.

These and so many others are strangers who should lay claim to our hearts. And yet so often, we fail them. It is only after they are gone that we realize who they were – that we finally recognize Jesus' image disguised by a face we simply considered a stranger. It is so much easier for us to sacrifice "strangers," since we just didn't know! How could we have known? Who would have ever expected Jesus to show up looking like that? But that's often how the Son of God shows up - unexpectedly and in disguise.

Perhaps Jesus knows something else about us and our human nature. He knows that if we were always sure about who he was and where he could be found, confident about how he looked and exactly what he would do, then we might just stop looking for him in every face and in every place. In fact, we might simply stop searching for him anywhere else except in the places WE expect him to show up. It is so much easier for us to just settle into our most comfortable perspective of Jesus,

and our most comfortable definition of ourselves and others. But the result of our settling is the failure to recognize Jesus in our midst.

So even though Jesus might make a practice of coming to us unexpectedly and in disguise, I assure you that he is here. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of him in one of your faces, sometimes I feel my heart strangely warmed by an unknown melody or a familiar tune, sometimes it's almost as though I hear him speaking directly/personally to me through the words of Scripture.

Sometimes Christ comes to us challenging us when we feel comfortable, and comforting us when our lives are caught up in turmoil. Sometimes he makes his presence known to us as the life of a child or adult is surrendered to God's purposes through the sacrament of Baptism. Sometimes Jesus comes to us as he offers to feed us with his broken body and quench our thirst with his poured out blood through the sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus is the One on the cross, God in our midst, the unexpected One, the hidden One, whose only crime is love, and whose greatest desire is that we embrace and embody within ourselves that same love.

Let us come now to this time of Holy Communion as those whose eyes and hearts and minds are open to recognize not just today in this place, but every day the One who comes to us as our Lord and Savior!