



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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He Was Really Big

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 16, 2012

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Mark 8:27-38

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples. Without a pause, the ever-ready Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." And we were off! Just a decade later, Matthew's version of the conversation contained a much more expansive Peter and Jesus. Listen to these words from Matthew: "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.'"

Wow, in one decade Jesus became the Son of God, so revealed to Peter by the Father; and Peter was elevated to the rock upon which the entire church will be built. In another decade, when the gospel of John appeared, Jesus was co-eternal and co-existent with God.

By anyone's standard the church's understanding of Jesus rose in meteoric fashion.

Have you ever wondered if the world would be different if Peter had answered differently?

This question occurred to me this week as I watched yet another stupid and relatively insignificant action on the part of an individual lead to an eruption of violence in the Middle East and beyond. Many argue and perhaps correctly that none of this—the entire conflict—has much to do with religion, that it is all about power and money and/or the highhanded actions of the U.S. and other First World nations over the years. The very complicated truth no doubt lies in some conflation of these and many other factors.

But I do believe that somewhere in the mix, religion, particularly the claim that one religion is the right religion, is to be found. I wonder how things might have been different if Peter had answered differently, maybe more along the lines of my grandchildren, whom I enlisted to help with this sermon. Yesterday morning, I asked two of them, "Who is Jesus?" One said, "I don't know, Granddaddy, hang on a minute" and immediately returned to his video game with no other word; the other said, "Wow. I don't know either, but he was really big."

What if Peter had said "Gee, Jesus, I am not sure who you are. Sometimes I think one thing, and then I think another, but this much I am pretty sure about: you are a lover. In fact, your love is so intense that it scares us sometimes. Leprosy, for example, is contagious; and, yet, you walk right up to those folks and look them in the eye and touch them. That is pretty wild, Jesus. And women, as you must know, are not really to be talked to. They belong to us and we can tell them what to do, but you are interested in their lives—and not because you want something from them but because you care about them. And remember those little kids who kept bugging us the other day? You told us to bring them to you so you could play with them. Rabbis don't play with kids, Jesus."

What if Peter had said, "Jesus, you are a spirit man. You live in this world, but most of the time you seem so different from the rest of us. It is almost like God's spirit speaks through you. You tell us to love our enemies and to forgive an infinite number of times. You tell us not to worry about material things, that you have what we are really looking for and that it really doesn't have anything to do with physical food and clothes. In fact, you tell us to share whatever we have so that everyone will have some. Jesus, that's a little radical."

What if Peter had said, "Jesus, not to be disrespectful, but you are also a bit of a trouble maker. You told us the other day to harvest some grain from the field because we were hungry; and, yet, you knew full well that it was the Sabbath and that the Pharisees were going to have a fit. And what about the time you went a little crazy in the Temple? You were outraged that poor people were being kept away from God's Temple because they couldn't

afford to buy some bird to sacrifice. Remember that, Jesus? That won't be easy for anyone to forget."

What if Peter had said, "Oh, Jesus, I don't really know who you are. Not really. But I know that when I hear what you say and see the way you live I want to follow you to the ends of the earth. I am not sure what that means; and from some of the strange things you have said and done, I am beginning to think it may not end well. But I know that in ways I can't begin to explain to anyone else, just being in your presence makes me feel closer to God, to myself, to those I love, and even to total strangers."

What if Peter, more like my grandson Conner, had said, "Wow? I don't know who you are, but you are really big."

Beloved friends, we can't know for sure what Jesus or Peter really said, but what certainly got locked into the consciousness of the church was that Jesus had come as the Messiah, the Anointed One for whom the Jews had long been waiting for deliverance. And largely through the work of Paul, that message was repackaged as a claim that Jesus had come to be the Messiah for the whole world and that Christians must spread that news.

And here we are in 2012, in a world so polarized by religion that religious conflict may be our undoing. Now through the miracle of the Internet one crazy man's acting out in one corner of the world leads to the death of an ambassador on the other side of the world. How much religion has to do with it is debatable, but there is no doubt that hate, particularly hate speech, which often has to do with religion, is alive and well and not just in a spot or two here and a lot of places "over there."

I was in Mississippi this week checking on my mother, a trip that also allows me to see my grandchildren and their parents. But there is a three-hour drive between them. My cheap rental car did not have Sirius Radio, so I had to sort through local stations. There has always been the occasional religious or gospel radio station in the South, maybe elsewhere too. On earlier visits to my native state, I might settle on one of these stations for a little moment of nostalgia. Driving way too fast, drinking a Diet Coke and, in an earlier life, munching on a Snicker's bar, I'd sing my heart out on "Blessed Assurance," "How Great Thou Art" and "Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling." I knew every word and could sing each in four parts all at once! Thank the Good Lord there was never anyone in the car with me!

However, since the rise of the religious talk show—which is an abomination before God if you are in search of one—I can't find a station with music. And it is not that there are fewer religious stations; literally every other station is one, now monopolized by male voices talking about gay marriage, the right to life movement, and a strong military! Not a word about poor people—except that they ought to work harder; not a word about love—except specific ways it shouldn't occur; not a word about mercy—except that justice is severe. And it is all said in mean language, not a speck of humility, just certainty that they are right and everyone else is wrong.

Whether talking about different denominations or world religions, I remember a time when dogmatic people on both sides of any issue were considered boorish; now they are more than that—they are dangerous. Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" remains really important; and it is critical that we are clear about our answer. Jesus is my messiah; and in my heart, I believe the God who dwelled in Jesus and continues to live in the spirit of Christ here among us is the One who will bring all things to completion. But I have not received the final word about how that process occurs or what other people need to do or must call that One. And further, neither getting nor giving the final word about it is my responsibility—or, I respectfully argue, that of any other human being.

Our job as Christians is to follow Jesus and to leave the rest to God, particularly the messianic stuff. Understanding that may be our best chance for surviving and thriving in our complicated global existence—and for living faithful, holy lives.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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