

Epiphany Season/Gospel of John
Jan. 11 2015
Struggle about the Identity of Jesus¹
John 7 and 8

Good morning. It's good to be back after vacation. It's good to see many of you also back from vacations or time with family and friends in various parts of the country. I returned on Thursday from Cuba. It was not a resort vacation although I understand that's a very popular way to travel to Cuba. I went to Cuba in order to meet with Ary and Beidy, pastors and doctoral candidates who lived and studied in Canada for three years before returning to their home in Cuba. I visited them there and visited the seminary where they teach and the church where they pastor and worship. I also spent time at a church guesthouse where I was warmly received and well cared for. And of course I also had an opportunity to enjoy the sand and the sun and warm Caribbean waters. Coming back was a bit of a shock, but here we are.

This morning's sermon is the second in a series of sermons on the Gospel of John. Peter Haresnape began our series last Sunday with a sermon on the prologue of John the first 14 verses that provide us with a very particular description of who Jesus is. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. This One who was coming into the world was the light that the darkness could not overcome. Jesus, in this description, is the one who reveals the grace and truth of God to all and has the power to

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transform those who accept this grace and truth into children of God. Peter set this text next to the primary Epiphany text in Matthew, the visit of the Magi, the revealing of Christ to the Gentiles. In Cuba, I had the opportunity to hear Ary preach on this text in Spanish and I was very pleased that I understood much of it. His primary point was that Jesus' responsibility was to make it possible for all of us to become children of God. And by doing so made it possible for all of us to embody the same light and life and love and truth that Jesus is. All of this is not an aside but in fact matters very much for my sermon today for my task today is to look at John chapters 7 and 8. These chapters include significant debate and tension around the question of Jesus' identity. So as the season of epiphany continues, the season of the revealing of Christ to the Gentiles, let us continue to ask, "who is this Jesus and why does he matter?" This is a primary question and not just a question but a real struggle in chapters 7 and 8. For Jesus it is a life and death struggle. Is it also a life and death struggle for us?

Let me give you a brief overview of these chapters. They are not chapters where we normally spend a lot of time. The chapters that normally capture our study and preaching attention are John chapter 1 including the important prologue, chapter two, the calling of Jesus disciples' and the wedding at Cana, chapter 3, the story of the Nicodemus, chapter four, the story of the Samaritan woman -the woman at the well and chapter 6, the feeding of the multitudes and Jesus' self-identification as the bread of life. So now by chapter 7 and eight he's receiving significant resistance. Several of his disciples could not receive his teaching about the bread and left him. The

Pharisees and other religious leaders have begun to consider a plot to kill him.

In chapters 7 and 8, geographically, the action shifts to Jerusalem where Jesus attends the festival of the booths. Jesus is aware of the plot to kill him and so initially he remains hidden and goes about in secret, but that doesn't last very long. In the middle of the festival Jesus does in fact to go up into the temple and begins to teach. His teaching receives mixed responses that range from amazement at his authority to serious resistance and many many questions about his identity. Being a bit more specific here, his teaching amazes the people causing them to ask how he can have this kind of learning when he's never been taught. Despite this comment by the people, it's clear throughout this gospel that Jesus is very familiar with the Torah, with the law of Moses, and in fact he does a lot of interpreting of the scriptures. In his own response to this question he emphasizes that his teaching is from God, from whom he comes. The point appears to be that his learning has not been done in the traditional way. Over and over again he responds to the question of his identity by pointing to the Father, the one whom he was sent into the world to reveal. As the struggle over Jesus' identity increases throughout these two chapters, his actions as well as his words reveal his connection to the One who sent him into the world.

At the end of the festival when the people are celebrating God's provision of water in the desert he stands up and identifies himself as the provider or source of this water. "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink."

As the struggle over Jesus' identity continues, they bring him a

woman caught in the act of adultery in order to test him. Jesus responds to the accusation by bending down and writing in the sand. The Greek word used for writing here is a legal term.

and so some think that he writes the law of Leviticus that says that both the man and the woman caught in adultery should be stoned. In this way, he questions the Pharisees' ability to keep the law, as they have let the man in this case go free. Then he says, "let the one who is without sin, cast the first stone," and continues to write in the sand. This time the Greek word for *write* is more generic like writing a list. Speculation suggests that maybe he's making a list of other sins with which they might identify. When he looks up again they have all left. And Jesus says to the woman, "Has no one condemned you? Neither do I. Go and sin no more." What does this story reveal about Jesus? Like the One who sent him he too is full of forgiveness, grace and compelling truth; truth that requires a response.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law in this story continue to be unable to "hear" Jesus' response to the identity question, that he answers repeatedly with his words and example always pointing to his connection with the God of their ancestors. They cannot hear the truth that can set them free and in fact they want to kill him. But there are others throughout the story who hear his words, see his actions and accept and believe that he reveals God to them – and in this way also become children of God full of light and life.

Does the same struggle continue today? Do we continue to ask, who are you, Jesus? Who do you claim to be? Tom Wright, an important

Anglican theologian, would say that yes in fact we have been asking that Jesus identity question for centuries. And it has taken many twists and turns in the history of historical critical thinking. But we know that it is not just scholars who ask this question. I ask this question. Even though I've been preaching now for many years, even though I've been studying scripture for as long as I can remember, every time I begin to look at some new cultural political social situation, and I examine the context within which we find ourselves, I ask in my prayers, who are you Jesus and what do you have to do with this? Maybe you find yourself doing the same. Plug into this part of the sermon the thing that you are most deeply concerned about and ask yourself what does Jesus have to do with it? That's what I did while journaling on a beach in Cuba this week. I've been thinking a lot about climate change lately and lying on a beach in Cuba staring up at the sky and seeing no less than 8-10 jet streams, and knowing that I was just one more of the thousands, should I say millions of contributors to that carbon and toxic mess, I was truly struggling with the question, who are you, Jesus and where are you in the midst of all this? And on top of that I had just finished reading the book *this changes everything* by Naomi Klein. The subtitle of the book is capitalism versus climate change. In this book she critiques our current economic model and claims that its fundamental values are antithetical to the survival of the planet and our species as we know it. And she makes brilliant connections between all the different aspects of society that need to become more just if we are going to save ourselves. The book is filled with analysis and critique of the problems, but also with many stories of persons and communities

that are really changing the way they function. For example, she shares a story of a town in Kansas that was 95% wiped out by a tornado. Within days of the disaster leaders in the community got together and decided that they had an unprecedented opportunity to rebuild their community from scratch. Now several of their primary town buildings are Leed certified and the entire town is no longer dependent on a fossil fueled power grid but entirely on renewable resources. People from all over the United States visit this community to see what and how they accomplished this feat.

As brilliant as the book is, Naomi Klein does not ask the question in the face of all of this, who are you Jesus and what do you have to do with this?

That's our task. That's the task of this community.

And we're going to need a lot of epiphanies in this regard if we want to be faithful Jesus followers in the light of the kinds of things that Naomi Klein described in this book. And the kinds of epiphanies that I'm talking about, even divinely inspired ones, are usually initiated by some simple or commonplace occurrence or experience. Let me tell you about one of mine this past week.

Sitting on a sandy beach in Cuba, I was writing in my journal this question, "what does Jesus have to do with all of this?" and it was coming from a pretty deep place – I suppose you could say that it came from my prayer place as I was asking the question to Jesus directly... who are you and what do you have to do with all this? But while I was writing, thinking, praying, I slowly became aware of a soft thud that was slightly vibrating the ground where I was sitting and eventually I had to stop writing and actually look to see what was

going on. At the top of a near-by palm tree I saw a young man clinging to the large branches and peeling off coconuts and dropping them to the sand below with this repeated soft but significant thud. I watched for a while and then stood up to see more clearly and it was then that I saw a woman at the base of the tree gathering the coconuts into a pile. When she saw us, I was with a friend, she immediately picked up two of the coconuts and brought them towards us and dropped them into the sand at our feet. She was quite adamant that we accept them. Understandably we were surprised and pleased by this unexpected gift and so returned to the house where we were staying with two very large coconuts in hand. The housekeeper of the guesthouse, Ada was her name, called to young Ramon who was helping her to get the machete and open one of them for us so we could drink the *agua de coco*, the coconut water. It took quite a bit of hacking, but he was confident where I was not and eventually got it open and drained more than 3 cups worth of the water into a small pot. The cook of the house, Dahlia, then strained the water into a pitcher, then she and Ada examined the centre of the coconut to see if the nutty meat there was good to eat. Ada, with a spoon in her hand scooped up the milky interior of the coconut and thrust it towards my face. I thought it probably wasn't a bad idea to open my mouth and try it. She fed me a couple of more mouthfuls before I resisted and then she told me to *bebe el agua de coco porque es bueno por el stomago*. My friend and I should drink the coconut water because it was good for our stomachs.

What about all of this was my epiphany? What did Jesus have to do

with all of this? The only thing that I can say is – everything.

Jesus didn't write in the sand, Jesus interrupted my prayer and dropped coconuts in the sand and in about 30 minutes showed me abundance, provision, hospitality, graciousness, generosity, community, a family of strangers and fed me with life giving water and coconut milk and then said, "now, go and sin no more."

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Who is Jesus and what does Jesus have to do with our response to our deepest concerns – like climate change? Jesus has everything to do with it. There are so many people and communities all over the world who embody grace and generosity and hospitality and community and who are keepers of the land, its produce and its life-giving waters. I pray we are among them so that all of us as children of God, this strange new family/family of strangers, can embody the light and life and truth of the God that Jesus came to reveal to us. This truth will set us free.