

SERMON

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September 16, 2018

*Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"
And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?"
Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."*

Mark 8

*That boy-child of Mary was born in a stable,
a manger his cradle in Bethlehem.
What shall we call him, child of the manger?
What name is given in Bethlehem?
His name is Jesus, God ever with us,
God given for us in Bethlehem.*

Thomas Stevenson Colvin (1925-2000)

A Christmas carol in September? You probably think I've lost my mind. But I have my reasons. Hymnals, church songbooks, have been called, "The Theological handbook of the people." I was around for the revision of the blue hymnal that is here in the pews. The debates at The General Convention where it was ratified were contentious. Until that time, I hadn't really thought about the hymnal as being that important. But it is. It both teaches and shapes who we are as Christians. I've always been interested to know what a person's favorite hymn is. It often says a lot about who they are and what they really believe. What's your favorite hymn? I hope I'm not revealing anything too personal but —let's see. Coral. Hymn 118 in the LEVAS Hymnal. "*Oh, let the Son of God Enfold You*" Maryellen. "*The Lord of Sea & Sky.*" Charlotte. "*I Come With Joy.*" Jim. "*Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory.*" After 97 years just imagine what "glories" Jim Conboy has seen in the country, the world, and in this very church. Starting with President Warren Harding—who was President Harding? In 1921 Ireland was fighting for its independence from the United Kingdom. You know this must have been important to Jim's Irish-born

parents. There were race riots in Oklahoma. The Chicago White Sox were accused of throwing the World Series. And Einstein was awarded the 1921 Nobel Prize in Physics. “Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory” was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862 and links the judgment of the wicked at the end of the age from Isaiah and the Book of Revelation with the American Civil War. Nationally and internationally it is known as an American patriotic song. It is Jim’s favorite.

There’s an Early Church hymn embedded in the Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter 5. Here’s the version included in the 1982 Hymnal.

*All praise to thee, for thou of King Divine,
Didst yield the glory by thy right was thine
That in our darken hearts thy grace might shine.*

Alleluia! Alleluia!

*Thou cam’s to us in lowliness of thought;
By Thee the outcast and the poor were sought,
And by Thy death was God’s salvation wrought:*

Alleluia! Alleluia!

This used to be my favorite. #477. (Hashtag 477) Now my favorite is “Precious Lord Take My Hand.” (I guess I’m tired.) Or maybe “Shall We Gather At The River.” You see, from my boat on the Severn River I can see the sparkling water and shining banks of the Jordan. Hymns can make real. I wonder what your favorite hymn is? It very possibly reveals what you think about God and who Jesus is for you.

And Jesus asked them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Back in the late 90's at the opening Eucharist of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, the keynote speaker, or rather the preacher, was the Archbishop of Canterbury—George Carey. His audience was made up of elected church leaders who gathered for two weeks to do the church's legislative work—two weeks of hearings and resolutions and voting intended to provide focus and guidance for members back in the pews of congregations across the United States and in provinces of Mexico and Central America which are part of the Episcopal Church in part the Anglican Communion. Archbishop Carey began his sermon to a crowd of ten thousand with these words:

*We will not be able to do anything significant
if, first, we do not get our Christology right.*

Christology. From the Greek, Christology means the field of study within Christian theology which is primarily concerned with the *being* and *person* of Jesus as recorded in the gospels and the epistles of the New Testament. Early Christians found themselves confronted with new ideas relating to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and new concepts about salvation and redemption. They searched for new terms and images in order to express their experiences. Old terms and structures seemed insufficient as they tried to understand and explain and talk about their experiences of Jesus called the Christ, the Messiah. Then, as they tried to explain their experiences and concepts to new audiences influenced by Greek philosophy, they used philosophical categories to present their beliefs and arguments. Christology. That's what it's called. For Paul and the Apostolic Age themes included *pre-existence* and the worship of Christ as *Lord*. Following the Apostolic Age, the Early Church engaged in fierce and often politicized debates on these concepts. Every one of the first seven ecumenical councils addressed Christological issues. A little history with dates: (Don't worry, there will not be a test at

the end.) 325. The First Council of Nicaea defined the persons of the Godhead and their relationship with one another. Decisions were ratified at the First Council of Constantinople in 381. Due to politically-charged differences in the 4th century schisms developed and the first denominations formed, from the Latin meaning “to take a new name.” The Council of Chalcedon in 451 marked a key turning point in the Christological debates. In the 13th century...Are you still with me? St. Thomas Aquinas provided the first systematic Christology that resolved a number of issues.

Archbishop Carey is right about the importance of Christology, “of getting it right,” but where do we draw the line? The time-line, that is. May I suggest that we take a different approach. It has been said that each denomination of the church seems to have its own theological personality or *sensibilities* that match seasons of the Church. It is said, for instance, that the Roman Catholic Church is a *Good Friday Church*, focusing on the crucifixion, the suffering and the need for forgiveness and redemption. That makes sense. The Lutheran Church is sort of a *Lenten Church* focusing on discipline and teachings and has a rather stern look at the human condition. That makes sense. The Greek and Eastern Orthodox Churches are *Easter Churches* focusing on the resurrection and eucharistic liturgies, emphasizing the beauty and mysteries of faith. That makes sense. The Pentecostal Church, of course, are *Pentecost Sunday Churches* focusing on the Holy Spirit and the power of transformation. That makes sense. What about the Episcopal Church, or the Anglican Church as it is called world-wide? Is there a season of the Church that best describes our sensibilities? I think so. How about Christmas? It is said that we are a *Christmas Church*. We love a good story. We’re a bit sentimental. We love Christmas carols and some warm chocolate. We love shimmering lights in the darkness and a cosy family around the fireplace with the family dog (or cat on the windowsill). Our theology focuses on the incarnation, the surprising presence of God in our midst. *Emmanuel. God with us.* All the time. Right here. Right now. This makes sense, too.

The story of the nativity of Jesus impacted the Christological issues from the earliest days of Christianity. From Luke and Matthew we see heaven and earth come together in Jesus and his mission and role as the savior. Matthew identifies Jesus as "*God with us*" which he develops throughout his Gospel and he concludes with it:

"I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,"

You see, I'm not so crazy to have included a Christmas carol as today's Gospel hymn with a sermon on the topic of Christology.

*That boy-child of Mary was born in a stable,
a manger his cradle in Bethlehem.*

What shall we call him, child of the manger?

What name is given in Bethlehem?

His name is Jesus, God ever with us,

God given for us in Bethlehem.

Archbishop Carey's challenge to "get it right" is a lifelong challenge, a centuries-long challenge. But the Gospels offer a plethora of images and answers! As I sat listening to Archbishop Carey's sermon I translated his words into a sort of Cotton Patch version. Here's what I came up with and that I offer to us, today, as we begin another church year together.

*Ain't nothing much gonna happen round here of any significantce
or lasting effect, unless we know who Jesus is.*

Instead of Christology, how about “*Jesusology*.” Or as our Presiding Bishop puts it, #JesusMovement. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry would be the first to agree that we need a good Christology if we are going to get much done that is both significant and faithful but he is also clear about not letting it get too complicated. Bishop Curry strips away inaccessible language, artificial piety, and barriers of time and distance in order to embrace all God’s people. He challenges us to reveal to people everywhere, the love of God in Jesus whoever they are and wherever they are—even at a royal wedding, especially at a royal wedding, with much of the world looking in. Bishop Curry’s twitter-feed says:

Following Jesus into a loving, liberating, and life-giving relationship with God, each other, and with the earth.

In June he met backstage with U2 and Bono at New York’s Madison Square Garden where the globally renowned rockers discussed Curry’s *Reclaiming Jesus initiative*. Comments online following that meeting suggested that Bono help write a new hymnal. What a great idea!

I was surprised to learn that “*That Boy-Child of Mary*” was written by Thomas Stevenson Colvin who was a Scottish minister and missionary. Colvin was a pastor of a London inner-city parish for eight years and a missionary in Africa for 26 years serving mostly in northern Ghana and Malawi. Colvin's missionary ministry was characterized by justice issues such as Christian service committees, refugee resettlement, and community development projects. Several of his texts are set to African melodies and have found a home in Western hymnals. "*That Boy-Child of Mary*" uses a melody from Malawi. This hymn is a baby-naming song for the infant Jesus. Like a baby-naming ceremony in many African cultures the stanzas tell the meaning of Jesus' name -- "*God*

ever with us." A later stanza places Jesus in our family— "*Gift of the Father to human mother makes him our brother.*" In this hymn we learn that this newborn child carries the hopes of the whole world because he has come to save us.

Cultures, backgrounds, where you are from, how old you are—it all matters. It's ALL important. This is why embracing and celebrating the diversity of the church, of Epiphany Church, is so important. We need each other to know who Jesus is! *Who do you say that Jesus is?* That's the question at the heart of today's Gospel. The timing is just right because —

*Nothing much is going to happen around here of any significance,
here at Epiphany and in our lives, if we don't ask this question first.
Who do we say Jesus is?*

First things first. Who is this Jesus? Jesus comes to us across the years, wonderfully, beautifully, miraculously, encouraging and empowering and transforming us. And when we come to know who Jesus is for us, for each of us, we find that we are capable of the most sacred and holy things. We can teach, we can minister, we can share, we can serve, we can preach, we can heal and we can be healed. We are transformed by knowing Jesus. He is right here with us. And we are changed into the very likeness of Christ. We can love one another as we, too have been loved. From the final stanza of "*That Boy-Child of Mary,*"

*Gladly we praise him,
love and adore him,
give ourselves to him
of Bethlehem*

AMEN