

Jesus Isn't Over-the-Top... He's Below-the-Bottom
Exodus 1:8—2:10; Matthew 16:13—20

So... I was sitting in a coffee shop, minding my own business—reading the Bible, checking out the baseball standings on my cell-phone... when, out of the corner of my eye I spotted a person that I knew. She was an acquaintance, talking to someone I didn't know at all. But again: as I'm trying to have some 'introvert' time, I keep to myself and decide not to interrupt and say *Hello*. Just then, however, all around the coffee shop, the din of conversation subsides; and I can't help but overhear the person I didn't know ask about *me*. He was asking about the new, interim pastor at Salem Lutheran Church; and just as my acquaintance was about to respond, I stood up and waved my hands to alert them of my presence about fifteen feet away. I didn't want to hear what she would say—how she would identify me or characterize me; *what if it were something bad?* Anyway, my effort to interrupt them came too late and to no avail; and so I heard what she said. It was sort of ambiguous, not good and not bad. She said, “Yeah, he's Presbyterian...” And then she added, “He's a little over-the-top.”

Now, I don't know whether these inadvertent 'eavesdropping' experiences have happened to you, but in the midst of today's passage from Matthew 16, I wondered how it must have felt for Jesus. Unlike my situation, Jesus takes the survey about his own identity deliberately: ***“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”*** He actually wants to hear the opinions, the perspectives, the vantage points. But notice the awkward way Matthew's Gospel records the question. Rather than depicting Jesus as using the first person pronoun 'I' (as he does in Mark's Gospel—8:27), here he uses the third person title, ***“Son of Man.”*** Huh? Doesn't that sound a little over-the-top?

Maybe. But maybe not. First of all, by assigning himself the title, ***“Son of Man,”*** Jesus isn’t necessarily trying to boast or brag about himself. In the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet is addressed by Yahweh, the God of Israel in Exile, 90 times by that very same title—and in those cases, it can be translated as *Mortal Human Being*, which is very humble and very frail. Ezekiel 2:1 reads, ***“O Mortal [Son of Man], stand up on your feet and I will speak to you.”*** By contrast, in the Book of Daniel, chapter seven, verse 13, there’s a whole apocalyptic can of worms that’s opened up: ***“As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.”*** So here’s my down-and-dirty interpretation: I think Jesus refers to himself here as ***“Son of Man”*** because he wants to find the balance between his insignificance and his significance—both his humility and his openness to the meaning his life and his death may have. And so, he’s asking: what is it other people are saying?

Several years ago I was walking my dog passed a church marque; and scrolling in electronic script were the words, “MAKING JESUS FAMOUS.” And my initial reaction was *Duh! No one has to make Jesus famous.* In fact, the problem with trying to make Jesus into some kind of celebrity is that we have a tendency to glom onto the fame and forget the substance. Moreover, if we get tired of the fame of any celebrity like I get tired of hearing about Kim Kardashian, we sometimes cancel our subscription to *People Magazine*. And doesn’t this happen with Jesus—and with the church—in the twenty-first century? He’s a topic among many topics. He’s interesting for a while... until he’s not. And then we can move on to the next big thing and the thing after that. Either way, it’s sort of exhausting. It’s exhausting to talk about *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus none stop*; and it’s also exhausting to move on to the next big-time religious celebrity.

“All my friends are finding new beliefs,” writes the poet Christian Wiman, and doesn’t he sound exhausted?

All my friends are finding new beliefs
and I am finding it harder and harder to keep track
of the new gods and the new loves,
and the old gods and the old loves,
and the days have daggers, and the mirrors motives,
and the planet’s turning faster and faster in the blackness,
and my nights, and my doubts, and my friends,
my beautiful, credible friends.

And, of course, with *the beautiful, credible friends* of Jesus, the same dynamic applies: **“*Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*”** It’s a veritable *Who’s Who*—a list of Hebraic star personalities, all of whom would have been famous to the average first century Jew. But wait: look where the disciples have landed—*Caesarea Philippi!*—which is a city that’s been named after, and dedicated to, Caesar Augustus, the deified ruler of the Empire, and to Herod Philip, the other son of Herod the Great and the brother of Herod Antipas, who, the story goes, had shacked up with Philip’s wife and eventually served the head of John the Baptist on a platter... Isn’t this starting to sound like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* or *Housewives of the Rich and Famous*? And the point is—no one in Caesarea Philippi is really impressed with the Hebrew prophets or anything that’s written in the Hebrew Bible. With all this other drama and intrigue, who cares? And that’s what opens the door for Simon to say something totally outrageous and maybe a little over-the-top: **“*You are Messiah, the Son of the Living God.*”** Now, as beliefs go, it’s hard to move on from that one. And what makes that claim so compelling is that, for Simon, it’s both PERSONAL—not gleaned from the grapevine or the social media of the day—and yet it’s also UNIVERSAL.

The claim—as it is a claim—is that Jesus is worth knowing. Jesus is worth knowing as more, much more, exceedingly more, than just a passing fad, a peculiar phase in life, a pastime that you happened to be raised with. In other words, he’s not merely the special hero of a particular sect of Jews—alongside all those prophets. He’s not just relevant to his specific fanbase like Jalen Hurts and Bryce Harper are relevant to me as a fan of Philadelphia sports. On the contrary this **“Son of Man”** speaks—this **“Messiah”** listens—and this **“Son of God”** lives with the Universal Authority of the Creator of the Cosmos. Moreover, the meaning of his life corresponds to the salvaging of all human history. Now, isn’t that over-the-top? Hmmm. Let’s see.

One of the interesting parallels of Jesus with Moses in the Book of Exodus is that both of them are born in secret. Both of them enter public life from obscurity. Moses is hauled out of the Nile at the height of the Egyptian Empire; and Jesus breaks the water of a teenage girl in Bethlehem at the height of the Roman Empire. And what I’d like to emphasize in our humble congregation is how repeatedly God sneaks into the world from BELOW-THE-BOTTOM. It doesn’t seem as if he needs or wants the fanfare. And so, here’s the on-going challenge. No sooner than Jesus appears on the radar-screen of the powers-that-be—no sooner than he becomes more popular and more famous even today—you and I may lose sight of how he still does his best work in secret. And—as confirmation of this BELOW-THE-BOTTOM approach—consider what happens to Simon when he says what he says:

- First, Jesus renames him **“Petros,”** meaning *a fragmented piece of stone, a chip off the old, ancient block...*
- And second, we have this dynamic declaration: **“and on this Petra”**— meaning this *bedrock of earth*—**“I must build my church.”**

In college one of my roommates had a t-shirt that he made for himself. It was a sports jersey, all black, with white lettering where you'd usually find a surname like *Jordan* (as in *Michael Jordan* if you were into basketball). My roommate, however, had the letters '**G-O-D**'. And I remember someone asking him why—why he had '**GOD**' on the back of his shirt as if it was his name; and his answer has always stuck with me as the quintessential *mis*-understanding of who God is or might be. Taking another swig of his beer he said, "I'm cocky!" In other words, not only was he comparing himself with an all-powerful and an all-knowing deity, which is bad enough, but his presumption was that God must be supremely over-confident, rightfully arrogant, entitled and incredibly *over-the-top*. Well, I'm here to say: I doubt that 'God.' And I would encourage you to doubt that 'God' too.

In other words, I cannot imagine Jesus wearing a tunic with the words, *THEOS* or *ADONAI* or *YHWH*, embossed on the fabric. Was he—is he—really that cocky? Every once in a while, there will be a conversation in which Jesus is compared to the weightlifter who can bench-press a thousand pounds. Or he's the star quarterback... or the clean-up hitter in the bottom of the ninth... or the ice hockey center who scores a sudden-death goal in overtime... or the basketball forward who dunks on you ... or the soccer player who nut-megs the ball through your legs and you can't do a thing about it. But is that what the Bible truly leads us to believe? I read somewhere, "*To worship Jesus is like worshipping someone you could beat up.*" And despite how most of the numerically-growing churches in the United States are making Jesus famous, I'm always going to wonder about Matthew 16:20: "***Then he sternly ordered the disciples NOT to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.***" Shhh...

In his book, *Separation of Church and Hate*, John Fugelsang offers this description:

Jesus was a peaceful, radically nonviolent revolutionary who wasn't American, never spoke English, who hung around lepers, hookers, and crooks, never sought tax cuts for rich Nazarenes, was anti-wealth, anti-death penalty, anti-public prayer too. Never asked lepers for a co-pay, never called poor people lazy, never even slightly anti gay, never mentioned abortion. Supported paying taxes and was a long-haired, community-organizing, authority-questioning, anti-slut shaming, brown-skinned, Palestinian, unarmed, homeless Jew...

Now, that's a pretty impressive list of characteristics; and I believe they're all biblically-accurate and defensible. (And if you don't, please come see me; let's talk.). But here's what might be missing. It comes into the world from BELOW-THE-BOTTOM. It comes from the bedrock of who we are: ***"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."***