

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Interpreting Jesus – God in the Hands of Angry People
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Well, hello and welcome. If you've been around her for any length of time I'm sure maybe your first question is wow, why is he dressed this way? This is really not our style this is not how we roll around here, we're not too formal so it's atypical to see us dressed like this. It stands out because it's outside of our norm and sometimes when people, places, things present themselves differently or as a contrast to what we want or what we expect we probably have generally one of three reactions; intrigue, indifference or intolerance. Those reactions vary depending upon the who, what, when, where, why and how. As we continue our series this weekend God in the Hands of Angry People it's no doubt a different series. A series that's showing up a little bit different, we're hearing different conversations about it and it's different from the typical series that have done in the past and that's by design. So, if you're here for the first time this week, welcome, it's kinda like coming in the middle of a conversation so we want you to catch up. The last few weeks, starting with week one Pastor Mark kicked us off talking about how God has created us in his image and we have been creating God in our image ever since. And then week two Pastor Joel talked about these counterfeit gods or these different ideas of God that we have. Then week three, which was last week, Pastor Heather talked about the God of the Old Testament and if we have a problem with God it's probably because of something that he did in the Old Testament.

Well, this weekend I'm diving into Jesus. Eventually, we'll land in Matthew chapter 16 so if you have a Bible you can meet us there in just a moment. But Jesus, he is not the most famous person in history, but he's probably the most familiar person in history. His followers acknowledge him as God in the flesh as a matter of fact, Emmanuel is one of his names which means God with us. But what fascinates me most about Jesus is how he shows up different and the impact of this causes a cultural upheaval and it confuses the keepers of the religious order of that day and it has completely changed societal norms for the last 2000 years. That is the potential impact when difference comes on the scene. However, the challenge with difference is it introduces change and our view of change depends upon our interpretation of what is different. Now, Jesus no doubt shows up different. The Jewish scriptures of the Old Testament predicted a Messiah or someone who would come and rule and bring our authority to the present age. In fact, there are over 300 prophecies about this coming Messiah or Jesus starting in Genesis. So it wasn't like this whole Messiah thing was something out of nowhere or something new.

As a matter of fact, one of my favorite prophecies as it relates to Jesus is found in the Old Testament in the book of Isaiah, chapter number nine, verse six through seven. And it says...

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⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Now I don't know about you, but when I hear these words, it creates a certain picture or certain image in my head, but what is different is how Jesus showed up. Which is it different or did it match the expectation of what people would have had in mind or match the expectation of what the prophecies would have presented? Much like the one that I just read from Isaiah. Imagine you've been hearing these stories of a heroic figure for years, that's going to come and he's going to bring government on his shoulders and he's gonna bring his kingdom with might and power and strength. But then you have someone who shows up with raggedy tee shirt on and some jeans and some busted shoes and a trucker hat saying that he is the Messiah to lead this revolution and then people are following him. It's kind of anti-climactic, right? But this is kinda how Jesus showed up on the scene.

First of all, he shows up dignified and poor. He's wrapped in rags and an animal pen. Second of all, he was a carpenter. I mean, that's not a real sexy job, but that was the antithesis of someone like Herod the Great who was king at that time and he was viewed as powerful he was feared, and he was a great builder. And this is even in contrast to some of my heroes growing up like Batman and Superman. They had cool suits on and they had nice tools and equipment and different things to fight evil, but this is in contrast to how Jesus shows up. Thirdly, he consistently spoke of a kingdom, but he had none, at least how we would measure a kingdom. He had no army as a matter of fact, he had a rag tag of followers called his disciples. And then fourthly, he broke all of these ceremonial laws of cleanliness that Jews believed to be associated with godliness. He touched lepers, blind people, he hung out with people who are thieves and outcasts. This was not just some deviation, I mean it was not just a detour or a departure from what people will have thought. Yes, it was that, but it was far more. It was also very dangerous what Jesus was doing. Because over a very short period of time, this man who was God in the flesh, he drew interests from many people who were intrigued and they began to follow him. And they began to follow him in part because he was someone who comforted the afflicted, which was very different in that day, the afflicted were people that you didn't hang with or you didn't converse with or they weren't a part of your circle. So that was a very, very radical and different thing.

Eventually though, Jesus began to stir up intolerance and he incited fear in those who established and upheld the rules of the society. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, Jesus began to afflict the comfortable, the people who embrace this segregation within the culture, and that was not only different, that was a problem. You know, in modern times this reminds me of Dr Martin Luther King Jr., just over three weeks ago, we remembered his assassination and Dr. King was also a man who showed up, very different to be a mouthpiece for a people who were different and who's difference was not being accepted as equal. And so 50 years removed from Dr King's death we speak very gloriously of what he did. But that Dr King face tremendous opposition and not just opposition from those in society who had power, who wanted to keep things the way they were. But Dr. King also faced great opposition from black people the people who he was defending, even some poor people. And it was because his method of nonviolence was

considered soft and reckless. He was not a portrait of strength, power, and force. That's not how he showed up, at least not how he was viewed at the time by many. But Dr King's method was a reflection of his inspiration of Jesus. It was an inspired interpretation of how Jesus showed up different and he knew that equality of all men as image bearers could not be obtained through a show of violence, but a show of love, which is the force that Jesus said is the reflection of his brand. Listened to what he said to his disciples. He said, *a new command I give you love one another as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.* This was a very, very radical statement at the time because this is not how people treated one another in the culture it was about one upping when another, gaining an advantage.

But just for a minute and let me just expound upon that thought for just a minute because this idea of equality and love it very pervasive maybe unfamiliar in our culture, but it was, it was very different at the time because Jesus is teaching on this in a very divided cultural context, significantly change the sociological structure of who had worth and who did not. I don't have time to really dive into all of that this weekend, but first, from a divinity standpoint, only the king was considered to be made in the image of God, making him semi divine. Then you had all of the other people in society that fell underneath that first beginning with the people in the court, then the priests in the artisans and the business people, then the peasants and the slaves. You see, in the ancient world, all men were not created equal. And I know that there are still some segments in our society two thousand years later that still hold to that. But here's the thing, this was even the case amongst the established religious order because the lame and the deformed were not allowed in the precinct of the temple. Why? Because they did not reflect the perfect holiness of God. So when we hear Jesus in Luke chapter 14, telling a story while he's had dinner with one of the Pharisees and he's talking about a great banquet, that includes the lame, the blind, and the cripple. This would have been highly offensive to the hosts. This was completely against the rules.

Let me give you one more example just to make you feel a little bit more uncomfortable. Jesus mentioned children's several times in his teaching, and I know this seems very sweet and innocent, and some of us grew up on songs in church like {singing} "Jesus loves the little children". You guys know that song, I'm not going to sing it for you. But Jesus says in Matthew 18, unless you become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. This was a very radical statement at the time because children had no real value in the ancient world. They were virtually disposable and they were thought of as how can they serve the state if they're held that, that was their value. And as a matter of fact, the head of the household at the time had legal right to dispose of children based on gender, based on whether or not the head of household didn't want his estate to be divided up amongst too many people or whether they had a defect or they were lame. They could literally be thrown on a dung pile, drowned, some might even be rescued just so they can be enslaved. Just get that picture in your mind for just a second. So when Jesus says these things and we read some of his sayings throughout scripture, I want us to understand what this meant in the culture. We need to understand that how Jesus showed up was very, very different and it was problematic for almost everyone in the culture even if you embrace his teachings. The reason why is because it challenged everyone's worldview and it invokes the same questions then as it does now. I mean, who the heck is this dude? I mean, what

does all of this stuff really mean? How are we supposed to interpret Jesus? And that's what I want to talk about for the next few minutes, interpreting Jesus.

On one occasion, Jesus asked his disciples a question that is still relevant, I think to all of us today, and this question has everything to do with interpretation and we know that interpretation informs how we live, how we make decisions and it interprets or it challenges us or it pushes us to look at how we interpret Jesus and how we respond to him. Pastor Joel mentioned this a couple of weeks ago and I want to just circle back to it in a time that I have left this weekend. So if you have a Bible or you got a device where you go with me to Matthew chapter 16, we'll begin in verse 13 and we'll end in verse 18. If you don't have a Bible, we won't leave you hanging, the words will be up on the screen.

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¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (The Son of Man would have been one of the names that Jesus would have gone by) ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ "But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

You know, being a father is one of the greatest joys in my life. It's also one of the greatest challenges that I have as well because it's very, very difficult raising children, but for me the biggest challenge for me as a father and as a parent is not whether Jaylah, Joslyn, Isaiah, or Journey, do what I asked them to do and we're still working on getting those percentages up Journey is still a baby so she doesn't count right now, but the biggest challenge for me is how my children interpret me as their father. How are they interpreting my words and my ways because I know the interpretation that they have or that they're getting from me is shaping their worldview and it will influence how they present themselves to the world and I'm learning that as I watch what I say with my two year old when I say things like, your butt stinks. He's repeating that now so he doesn't understand that he's not supposed to repeat that in public, so I'm working on that. But so often I'm asking my older girls, particularly Jaylah and Joslyn who are 13 and 11. I'm asking them interpretation questions when I said this, did you understand what I mean? And when I did that, do you understand why?

Dea Samuel, who is one of our long time volunteers at our Kingstown campus, he volunteers with NCC Kids and a couple of other ministries. He said something to me a few years ago and I never forgot it. He said, children are great imitators, but they are poor interpreters. You know, I believe that to be true and I know Jesus knew that will be true as well because he knew that people following him, including those closest to him, would imitate him, but would they have the correct interpretation of who he is and was? You know, it'd be great 2,000 years later, we're still not having interpretation issues as it regards to Jesus, regarding Jesus, but we do. Jesus knew this, which is why he's asking the question for the benefit of the of the disciples then and for the benefit of us now This is also why Jesus often use metaphors in his stories called parables so that he could clarify himself and his mission because he knew the majority of people might not

get it, and even those who are upholding some of these inequitable societal norms, they didn't want to get it, but it was mission critical for the disciples to get the interpretation right. So I want us to listen and unpack this exchange that Jesus is having with his disciples because I think it gives us a critical insight whether we are Christ followers or not.

So the response to the first question that Jesus asked, who do people say that I am? So they say John the Baptist, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. What this means to me is that the people didn't really have a category for Jesus. When something or someone shows up different, we have to categorize it for our understanding that that's how our brain works, but often the category or the label doesn't fit. And the disciples said that, hey, the folks out here that they're naming people that they have a point of reference for. And that's normal human tendency to characterize based on others we have encountered. Now John the Baptist, Isaiah Jeremiah, they were not bad examples and I can't really fully get into who they were but John the Baptist definitely showed up different. I mean he was eating locusts, you know, in the wilderness. He was called a wilderness prophet, you know, just crazy hair. So they were like, ok, maybe he kinda crazy like John the Baptist. And then you've got Isaiah and Jeremiah the prophets were never popular people. They always had challenging messages and so I can see how people would say that Jesus would be like them, but this was not the full picture of who Jesus is. And I think that that's part of the challenge with both followers and non-followers of Jesus. You know why? Because it's easier to put a familiar label on something than to truly investigate it or to seek clarity. So then we ended up with a Jesus, that's either a small part or it's no part at all of who he really is and we end up with these different kinds of Jesus' a liberal Jesus or a conservative Jesus or just a good man Jesus or a precious Jesus or a gangster Jesus or my homeboy Jesus or maybe even an completely irrelevant Jesus. You see the Jesus, I think that we accept or reject matches some part of our ideology that we have elevated or some part of our personality that leans on the side of grace or truth or something that we are comfortable with or that we've made up or something that just makes sense to us. And the result is we get a bunch of self proclaimed Jesus followers who only promote love conditionally based on the interpretation that they have elevated, which often prevents us from embracing each other as equal image bearers. And then we have people like my ought wright brothers and sisters saying things like this one, I believe professor was quoted saying that Anglo protestant norms are superior, or you have a black pastor who was a friend of mine who I love dearly, who told me one time, all white people have an agenda despite any good intentions they may have, these are people who say they follow Jesus. And we not only come up with these different versions of Jesus, but we allow each other that have them and we accept this segregation among us. When Jesus' whole mission was about reconciliation, and so we've got Jesus followers on one side and we've got nine Jesus followers on the other side, and both of us are saying the same thing. Jesus, please get your people.

This is a problem because Jesus went to great lengths to model what he really meant. As a matter of fact, just look at the disciples themselves. I mean this is not a squad that you pick to change the world. These guys were rejects but not only that you had at least a couple among the group and including Simon, who were known as Zealots and they were part of a political party who wanted to overthrow the Roman government with violence, so you would've had Simon on one hand who was a zealot and you would have had a Matthew who was a tax collector on the other hand who worked for wrong and represented the oppression, they would have been natural enemies. So then Jesus chooses natural enemies to work alongside one another to advance his

kingdom, which was all about reconciling us back to God and each other. So then why are we embracing the versions of Jesus that we like, that perpetuate systems of segregation and justice and elitism? I'm so glad you asked that question because I'm going to tell you why. The reason why is because it's easier to embrace what is comfortable and what we like and that's why you had some people saying, oh well Jesus is like this, or he's like that, and so this is why Jesus presses further, because he knew that couldn't be the answers that his disciples gave so he pressed further.

And the second question he asked is, he says, but who do you say that I am? In other words, do you have someone else's version or do you have a true revelation? So Simon Peter says, you are the Messiah, the son of the living God, and this was a big response and Jesus' response to Peter's response indicates that. Basically he says, no one told you that God had to reveal it to you. Which indicates to us that the interpretation of who Jesus is can only be revealed to us. And once you had that personal revelation or experience, it changes the game. It's no longer a second hand experience or perspective. And I think so many people have walked away from God and walked away from faith because they had a flesh and blood version that someone else gave them, but they never got a revelation for themselves. Jesus went on to say, it is on that revelation, Peter, that I will build my church. A true revelation of who I am is what will have impact. A true revelation is what will become the new standard, not only of this world, but the next, and if you don't believe that that new standard is true, let me just give you some evidence in our culture, hospitals, orphanages, adoption programs, kids first license plates that many states now have, the elevation of women, humility as an accepted attribute. This is because God revealed himself in the flesh to a broken world and he said, *I'm sending myself in Jesus not to condemn the world, but to save it*, John 3:17. And the method was the cross seemingly crushing this ridiculous movement. But when Jesus rose from the grave, my friends, the whole thing changed and it hasn't been the same since. Whether you are a Jesus follower or not, the evidence is overwhelming.

Let me see if I can land the plane for us this weekend and bring us to a close. One of my favorite movies is the movie called "Coming to America" and I'm Akeem is a play by Eddie Murphy and he's the prince of Zamunda, which is a made up place in Africa. But he's going to go on mission to America with his friend and personal aide semi played by Arsenio Hall to find his wife in Queens, New York. So he leaves the comforts of Zamunda where he has everything made, I mean, he's got all that he can ask for. He's even got private people bathing him, that's kind of weird. But eventually he lands in Queens and he lays his eyes on Lisa, who's going to be the woman of his dreams. And so he goes undercover with his friend, Semmi, to get a job in a fast food restaurant than her father owns so that he can try to establish a relationship with Lisa. Well, this is when the plot turns and the anger begins to take root in, s Semmi because see Semmi was ok with the mission until he had to give up some comforts from home. Semmi was cool until he had to humble themselves and give up some of his privilege and get his hands dirty. Semmi was cool with, with living in a hotel and fine dining, but not in an apartment in the hood with carry out. He wasn't cool with any of those things. So at some point Semmi anger and discomfort, caused him to deviate and do his own thing. And I think the same is true for some of us. When it comes to Jesus. We brought an expectation to the table that went unmet and the unmet expectation produced anger and where you have anger, you have a fear or growing fear and fear causes us to grab hold to a false sense of security. And we have an idea of who we think Jesus is

and what his kingdom is all about. And we have an interpretation that embraces some but not all of who he is. And the truth of the matter is some of the stuff that Jesus calls us to is uncomfortable and we just flat out don't like it.

One of the examples that I think we glossed over is found in John 13 and his is when Jesus is washing his disciples feet. Jesus went to great lengths to display to us what it means to be a Christ follower. He strips off his power, he strips off his robe and he wrapped a towel around himself and he kneels down to wash the disciples feet, which would have been a job that slaves would do and not only that, where if you're the elite in the society, you did not work with your hands. I think sometimes the interpretation we get from Jesus is that we're waving the white flag and that we're giving up our authority, or some would say we're taking an L; which means you're taking a loss. Jesus demonstrates throughout the Gospels that a life fully submitted to him, not only activates the power of God in our lives, it changes the course of history and it ushers in transformation in us and around us, it frees us from stuff that we're attached to that can never satisfy us. So what that means is we actually gain freedom and greater authority through him. And those of us who have a true revelation of who he is, we've experienced that and we continue to experience it over and over again. It doesn't mean that we don't have issues. It doesn't mean that we don't struggle. It doesn't mean that we don't have drama. As a matter of fact, Jesus himself said, in this life, you will have trouble. You will have some drama, but take heart. My friends, I have overcome the world.

So as we close this weekend, I really just want to leave you with one challenge and it doesn't matter if you are a Christ follower or you're not a Christ follower. I want you to get your own revelation of who Jesus is, not someone else's version of it and Jesus himself invites us to do so. In John chapter one, verse 38 through 39, and he's talking to those who have turned and followed him and he turns around and he asked him, what are you seeking? And they say, we just want to know where you abide, we're intrigued. Well, he said, come and see.

So I just have a few questions for you to think about this weekend and throughout this week. Number one, what would it look like for you to diligently seek, for you to diligently investigate Jesus? What are some or who are some safe people that you can sit down and study with and unpack the scriptures and unpack your questions? How can you make this a priority in your schedule?

Jesus goes on to say that if you've seen me, you've seen the father. And to really see Jesus is to really get a true revelation of who he is and once you get a true revelation of who he is, it changes your life forever and things around you become different you show up different the world becomes different and I believe as the Christ followers really continue to stand up and be Christ followers and reflect him in the world we will see different and not these variations of who we think Jesus is. He says, come and see.

Let's pray. God, we thank you so much for who you are. We thank you for how you are challenging us throughout this series. God, we know that is intriguing some of us, we know that is stirring some of us and challenging and stretching some of us, but God, the hope is that we would diligently pursue you and seek you to get a revelation for ourselves, to not have a version that someone else told us or to not be lazy and just take someone else's word for it, but to get a

true picture of who you are, because once we do not only will our lives change, and not only will we show up different but the world around us begins to look different. God, help us to be a reflection of what a true disciple is and to reflect the Jesus brand in this world which is to love. These things we ask in your son, Jesus name. Amen.