

December 1, 2019 – Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 21:1-11

“Will the real Jesus please stand up?” That's the title of our Thursday morning breakfast Bible Study. Will the real Jesus please stand up? The world tries to throw all sorts of different versions of Jesus at us. Hollywood loves to depict Jesus, usually in the most controversial, unbiblical ways possible. And so, many people are left wondering: who is the real Jesus?

There's a particularly funny example of that idea in the movie “Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby”. In his prayer around the dinner table, Ricky prays to “the dear Lord baby Jesus in gold-fleeced diapers.” The Christmas Jesus, Ricky calls him. You can have your grown-up Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or ninja Jesus. But he's going to pray to the Christmas Jesus. And no one can convince him otherwise.

It's absurd. Hilarious. Moderately blasphemous. But, most importantly, it's surprisingly accurate. Say what you will about Will Farrell, but he pins down a very common problem in American religion. The temptation to reinvent Jesus in a way that's pleasing to us.

And our own Christmas carols reinforce this, of course. Think of a Christmas Carol like “Away in a Manger”: The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. The little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes. Aww... how sweet. Totally unrealistic. Totally unbiblical to be perfectly blunt. But who cares. This is the Christmas Jesus we're talking about, after all.

And yet, later in the song, Away in a Manger does at least get us closer to the mark than many of our pop culture references to the Nativity. The third verse reads, “*Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask Thee to stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care and take us to heaven to live with Thee there.*”

Now there is some halfway decent theology. Be near me, Lord Jesus. *Lo I am with you always to the very end of the age.* Stay close by me forever and love me, I pray. *For God so loved the world that he sent his only son.* Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care. *Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.* Take us to heaven to live with thee there. *Today, you will be with me in paradise.*

Good stuff. But, you may notice, not a single word of it from the nativity story itself. Which isn't a flaw in the verse. In fact, I would argue, it's Away in a Manger's key strength as a carol and hymn of the church.

Our Gospel lesson this week ends with a bunch of very confused people. Because all of Jerusalem has been stirred up by the arrival of Jesus. And yet most of them don't have a clue who he is. It's not that much different than the beginning of Advent in America. A whole lot of people getting stirred up for a holiday. And yet many of them wondering: “*Who is this?*”

And a lot of them will only ever see Ricky Bobby's “Christmas Jesus.” They'll see a cute little baby in a stable. And they'll hear things about Jesus coming to be a king. To be our savior. To offer forgiveness of sins. To bring peace between God and man. But will they really know who that Jesus is? Or will they just know a cute little baby Jesus, sleeping in a manger?

To know the real Jesus, we really have to look beyond the first and second chapters of Matthew and Luke's gospels. To go beyond that we have to do what the author of Away in a Manger did and look at Jesus' entire ministry. His miracles. His teaching. His ascension. Yes, even his death.

That's not something we do a lot of. Which is kind of odd actually, when you really think about it. After all, Christmas is first and foremost a birthday party. And how many of you spend each and every birthday party looking only at your baby pictures. Flipping through your baby book. Talking about the circumstances of your birth.

Sure, it might come up. I know from birthday parties past that I was born during a late-winter/early-spring ice storm. And that my dad was thrilled about that fact because, as both a principal and a teacher, it meant he could in good conscience simply close the school and not have to find a substitute to teach his class. I've seen the pictures. I've looked through the baby books. But that's not really what we usually celebrate most on birthdays, is it?

We celebrate a person's life. We celebrate their achievements. Their impact upon us. Their legacy to the world. Even more so with famous historical figures. Columbus Day, President's Day, MLK Day... we don't talk about the circumstances of their births. We talk about crossing the Atlantic for the first time. The founding of a new nation. The Gettysburg Address. The "I Have a Dream" Speech. The things that make them memorable and important to us.

Jesus' birth is certainly a memorable event in his life. And don't get me wrong, I am not in any way shape or form suggesting that it's wrong to celebrate the nativity. What I am suggesting is that before we get complete tunnel vision of the idealized baby Jesus, we ask ourselves, "Who is this?"

Is this only the Christmas Jesus? Or, as those in Jerusalem suggested, is this only the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee? Or, as Matthew describes him in our Gospel lesson, is this the king. Our king. Coming to us with utter humility. Yes, the humility of a helpless baby. But also the humility of man riding a donkey. Not a horse. Not a chariot. Not a throne. But a simple colt. The foal of a beast of burden.

Yes, this is the king. The Son of David. Descended from David's throne not just by maternal or paternal genealogy. But by God's anointing. And by the character of his heart. And depth of his devotion. As Isaiah prophesied, Jesus is reestablishing the house of the Lord, just as David once did. A place where all nations will come to worship.

But he's not doing it on the old Mount Zion, where David put his throne. No, the new Mount Zion is the highest of the mountains and lifted above the hills because it is where Jesus himself is lifted up on the cross. And we are the people coming to it. Flowing from every nation.

Saying, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord," and then climbing the steps of Calvary. Saying "Let us go to the house of the God of Jacob," and then looking upon the body and blood of God incarnate. Asking Him to teach us His ways and then finding that His ways are the ways of sacrifice and suffering. Walking in His paths by taking up our own cross and following Him.

Ultimately, the crowds had it right. They asked who Jesus was, but they were already shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" Hosanna, which is Hebrew for "Save us!" They already knew who He was. He was the one who came in the name of the Lord to save them. Save them by His birth. Save them by His death. Save them by His resurrection.

There's nothing wrong with worshipping the Christmas Jesus. So long as you remember that the Christmas Jesus is also the Easter Jesus. That the child in the manger is also the man on the cross. That the angels who proclaimed his birth to shepherds that Christmas evening also proclaimed his resurrected life to a group of women Easter morning.

And that the star that lit the way for wise men still guides us to walk in the light of the Lord. Walk in the light of His Word. Walk in the newness of life we receive by Baptism in His name. Until that day when the whole world sees that there is only one Jesus: the Jesus who returns on the clouds with power and glory. And He will reign forevermore. Amen.