

This morning I will tell you two stories. And then, I will try to say what these stories have to do with one another.

Story #1: Once upon a time—all stories should begin this way, don't you think?—Once upon a time there was a Jewish boy who grew up in a peasant family in one of the outlying Mediterranean provinces of the Roman Empire. He had a Mother and a Father, called Mary and Joseph. We can guess that he had four brothers, and an unknown number of sisters. His family was poor, even by peasant standards, because it owned no land. Therefore, he was required to learn the skills of a woodworker. He did not build houses, because houses were not made of wood. But he made doors and doorframes and furniture and cabinets. It was a living.

His town of Nazareth was about 100 miles North of Jerusalem, and many days journey from the great center of Rome. The boy probably grew up speaking at least two languages, Aramaic and Hebrew, and perhaps a third, which would have been Greek. He lived in a Jewish community, but there were many non-Jews from all over the world.

Did I mention that the boy was Jewish? He would have gone to school in the synagogue, reading primarily from one book, the Torah. He would have celebrated the Jewish holidays with his family. He might even have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with them. There is no doubt he observed the Sabbath, and that he probably said the Shema, the Jewish confession of Faith, once upon arising in the morning and once before bed in the evening.

There is at least the possibility that he was married, because the Law required all healthy Jewish males to take a wife. This is a theme that has provided scholars and the un-scholarly with lots of interesting speculation.

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This is all anyone really knows about this Jewish boy before he reaches manhood. I repeat: this is all **ANYONE KNOWS** and even this is largely speculative. There are other stories about his youth, but we will come to them in a minute.

At about age 30, the young man Jesus emerges into history for a very brief while. Possibly as the result of some kind of an epiphany, he emerges as a powerful religious teacher. He is followed everywhere by a band of students. Some were women, which would have been unusual at the time.

We can surmise that he had great presence, and remarkable verbal and public speaking skills. He could turn a hostile question back on the questioner. He had a wonderful, even humorous sense of the dramatic. He rode a donkey into Jerusalem to parody the arrival of Roman officials in their litters.

Despite what people said later, scholars are now inclined to agree that Jesus did not himself believe that he had come to be **THE** savior of the world. He did **NOT** believe that he was God, or even the Son of God. He chose instead, as his exalted title, "The Son of Man," or "The Son of the Man." As a teacher, he did not speak about himself. He spoke about God.

The end of my story is brief. This young Jewish teacher was executed for sedition and treason only a year or two after his debut onto the world stage. Although we know for a certainty that Jesus' followers survived and flourished, world history knows nothing more of this young, brilliant, Jewish teacher.¹

Once upon a time, there was a Roman emperor whose name was Constantine. World history knows more about Constantine than about Jesus—much more. For he was a man of great worldly power. But Constantine's day, the early 4th Century, was chaotic. Rome was holding its own against the tribal invasions from the North, but only barely. Internally, Roman society and culture was also experiencing intense internal strife.

One source of that strife was the descendents of the followers of the very teacher, Jesus, who had died in anonymity just about 275 years earlier. Despite intense, brutal suppression, this vigorous Jewish heresy—because Jewish heresy was what it was—continued to grow.

Constantine, Pagan to the core, but a brilliant political manager, saw in this an opportunity. This new movement seemed to have the ability to unite people across astonishing ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. So, precisely on October 28, 312 AD, Constantine arranged to see a heavenly vision of the Christ. According to Eusebius, a bishop of Palestine, the Emperor wasted no time in granting amnesty to the largest and most powerful segments of the Jesus movement. He also wasted no time in granting incentives, financial and otherwise, to help these groups overcome, willy-

nilly, the inevitable internal divisions produced over some 300 years.

He financed repair of old churches and the building of new ones. In some areas, he released his new friends from certain taxes. He gave control of the imperial grain supply to certain bishops. But he was careful to stipulate that these benefits applied "only to the adherents of the catholic [meaning universal] faith, or law." ² In other words, this amnesty didn't include Jews, or just any Christians, but only the "right" Christians.

Constantine took a further step to consolidate his support from Christians. He called a meeting of church which he hosted and paid for. This council was held in the city of Nicea, in the northwest corner of Turkey, near the sea of Marmara. It later became known as the Council of Nicea. That meeting forced the outlawing of independent, minority interpretations of faith by compelling allegiance to the Nicene Creed (which we all recited together this morning). And it ultimately determined that only 26 of many possible documents would be incorporated into what we now call "The New Testament." Revelations was added later.

Compared to my first story, the end of this one is long and complex. Emperor Constantine, a Pagan to his deathbed, had an enormous part in determining the very definition of Christianity and the Church itself. Through his church adherents, he established the chain of male, patriarchal leadership which survived virtually untouched into the 20th Century. And he permitted suppression of considerable freedom of thought and expression, once a mark of

Christian community, This in turn has led to a history of innumerable bloody conflicts which might otherwise need not have been.

To understand fully what happened here, it is only necessary to re-read the words of the Nicene Creed. It is more complex than the Apostles Creed, because it is meant to establish doctrine forever.

"I believe in One God, the Father Almighty... etc.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Light of Light, etc. . . Begotten, not made; Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made;

That is, with the Nicene Creed, the Church required its members to believe that Jesus and God are One. Jesus and God are the same. There is no distinction that can be made between Jesus and God.

It goes on. Listen to this next section:

"Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man; And was crucified also for us Pontius Pilate; And he suffered and was buried; And the third day he rose according to the Scriptures; And, ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of the Father: . . . etc

With those few strokes of the pen, Jesus humanity was stripped from him. And all you lowly sons and daughters of the earth were told they need no longer fear for their salvation—it had already been accomplished for them.

So, those are my two stories. It's really one story of course. It's the story of how one very human, human being became magically transformed into God. He is now a supernatural being.

The process of capturing the human Jesus into the realm of magic and the supernatural did not happen all at once. The process was very complex. There are numerous books on the subject. For anyone interested, I refer you to John Shelby Spong's "A New Christianity For A New World."

Bishop Spong suggests that the picture becomes clear if you look at the books and the *sources* of the New Testament in the order in which they were apparently written.

- The earliest documents are the letters of Paul. This puzzles people because the Epistles follow the Gospels in the Bible. But there is firm agreement among the scholars on this fact.
- Next there is a source called "Q" which has never been found by itself, but which provides material which is identical in both the Gospels of Mathew and Luke. It was probably written sometime around the year 50AD.
- There is the Gospel of Thomas, of which we do have a copy, found with the Dead Sea Scrolls at Nag Hammadi in the 1980's, but which has been dated in the mid to late 1st Century.
- Then comes the Gospel of Mark, in the 70's and 80's.

It is fascinating that none of these four sources know anything of a miraculous birth of Jesus. None but the Gospel of Mark have miracle stories. Spong accounts for the one's in Mark by showing

that they are used *liturgically*. They are fitted carefully to the Jewish liturgy. This would make sense for a Jewish spin-off group.

It is possible to spin out this thread all day. But the point is: There is no proof that Jesus presumed to be God. The early Christian community did not assume he was God, at least at first. He only became God as people reflected backward, trying to account for the effect he had on them.

But the overarching conclusion reached by a significant group of contemporary scholars recognized by the Church, is that it would be much easier to mesh modern reality and belief with the ancient stories if we had ways to describe Jesus life and work in non-supernatural terms.

I speak only for myself on this, but I confess that this is extremely important to me. I attended seminary not because I had any interest in Jesus, but because I was interested in philosophy and the many ideas about God. Had I been able to peer through the fog of magic and the supernatural, my life and my earlier relation to the Christian Church might have been altogether different.

At this point, let me share with you some of the things that I would have liked to have seen much earlier in my life. I take them straight from the work of Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg. He makes four points:

- Jesus was a **Spirit person**. He could be called a "Holy Man" but Spirit Person covers both genders. He was one of those people

that has appeared in every age and in every human culture who have a sense of the sacred, of the divine, of the eternal—of God.

- Jesus was a **wisdom teacher**. He used stories and short sayings, aphorisms, to make his teaching points. He was a gifted speaker.
- He was a **social critic**, a social prophet. Several of these were known in the history of Judaism. It is a kind of person with an intense sense of social justice. He points without reservation anywhere he sees innocent or unnecessary suffering. He has little patience or tolerance for what are called "The Powers That Be," authorities that exploit their power for their own ends. He is at home across every ethnic, sexual, political or economic boundary.
- Jesus was a **movement leader**, a movement founder. He knew not only how to lead, he knew how to empower those who joined with him so that they became leaders as well. He included women as well as men in his leadership group, though by the 4th Century this has been almost completely lost. However, there is interesting speculation that the person seated to Jesus' right, in Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper", was a woman, perhaps his wife (as might have been demanded by Jewish law). If she was a "she", surely she was part of his privy council.

Professor of Biblical Interpretation Walter Wink found a different way to talk about who Jesus was, and why he affected people as he did. Wink saw Jesus as an *archetype* of the human being. Jesus was the conscious, walking, talking, breathing embodiment of what every person, at the depths of his or her soul, wants to be.

Jesus is the property of the world. Mahatma Ghandi expressed a kind of resentment that the Christina Church insisted on hoarding Jesus to itself. Jesus truly human human-being, belongs to every tradition. He is universal humanity.

Walter Wink fastens on Jesus' use of the expression "The son of the man" to identify himself. Wink says this means that, for Jesus, and for us, the son of the man is enough. If we could but see, the miracle of human life, is enough.

- Jesus was interested in elevating humanity to the level of God, not reducing God to humanly comprehensible terms.
- So, whenever you encounter a person, maybe even a person very close to you, who is able to look at the world and see it higher, wider, deeper, you have encountered the "Son of the Man".
- Perhaps this is worth noting as we draw close to the elections of 2004: whenever we encounter a person who is able multiple values, larger than his or her own interests, we encounter "The Son of the Man."
- Whenever you can encounter someone able to stand between two or more opposing sides and guide them toward a course that transcends the immediate situation, you have encountered "The Son of the Man." I've heard one source argue that Tony Blair is one such person in our own time. You may play with that as you will.

- Whenever you encounter a person with a vision that is consistent, disciplined, passionate and yet even handed, you are watching "The Son of the Man."
- Whenever you find yourself, or someone else, longing for wholeness and compassion in action, there is "The Son of the Man."
- Or, if you must, you can return to the New Testament source, to find the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed is the Son of the Man, the one who hungers and thirsts after righteousness.

¹ Marcus Borg, "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, Chapter 2, page 20

² Elaine Pagels, "Beyond Belief", page 169

SHEMA

(The Jewish Confession of Faith or Anthem)

(To be read antiphonally, except for the first and last verses, read in unison)

- Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever
- And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart.
- And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.
- And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.
- And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.
- And it shall come to pass if you surely listen to the commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul,
- That I will give rain to your land, the early and the late rains, that you may gather in your grain, your wine and your oil.
- And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle and you will eat and you will be satisfied.
- Beware, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn and serve other gods, and worship them.
- And anger of the Lord will blaze against you, and he will close the heavens and there will not be rain, and the earth will not give you its fullness, and you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord gives you.
- And you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.
- And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.
- In order to prolong your days and the days of your children on the land that the Lord promised your fathers that he would give them, as long as the days that the heavens are over the earth.
- I am the Lord, your God, who lead you from the land of Egypt to be a god to you. I am the Lord, your God.