

Pat Conover: Jesus – Meaning of History

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Jesus: Meaning of History

I am offering an Advent sermon today even though our liturgy does not start lifting up Advent themes until next Sunday. The spiritual challenge of Advent for me has been to believe that life can really be new, that we are not stuck in the same old, same old. Advent answers yes to the deep existential question of Ecclesiastes "Can there be anything new under the sun." One thing new I have discovered this year is that you can start on Advent a week early even if the gospel lesson is about the trial of Jesus before Pilate.

I asked this opportunity to preach before I began [Jeanne's class on Jesus](#) in the School of Christian Living. This sermon arises from reading I have done which helps me see the meaning of Jesus in history in a slightly different way. Jeanne's class has deepened my appreciation of the transformative power of gathering together with attention to what Jesus was about, what Jesus was pointing to during his ministry.

When we say we want to understand Jesus better, we often mean that we want to understand Jesus better as an individual. One of the key agendas of the Jesus Seminar's scholarship about Jesus is to scrape away the additions of the gospel writers who tell us the story of Jesus from the perspectives of what they each thought was important. However, that scrapes away something of what Jesus made possible in others.

While we can try to separate out the biases of the gospel writers, there is no way we can separate our understanding of Jesus from the perspectives of those who Jesus touched directly. The important saving truths are truths that are shared between people, not intellectual truths that people think they can hold as individuals. The gospel of John begins by naming Jesus as the incarnation of the *Word of God*, not just as a teacher who taught about *God's words*. Jesus did not merely offer his words to others, he offered himself. It was his caring and not merely his teaching that powerfully touched so many. The Jesus Seminar likes to emphasize the ways Jesus was distinct from the culture he lived in. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the distinctness of Jesus can be overdone. The *commonness* of Jesus provides the bridges of understanding, an underneath approach to conversation that revalues the everyday truths his followers lived with.

The gospel writers are eager to tell us what really mattered about Jesus and do not provide much biographical information, much everyday detail. Looking back with different lenses than the gospel writers, and from a long time away, we are nonetheless like the gospel writers in wanting to know what matters about Jesus. We want a relationship with Jesus and not just knowledge about Jesus. We want to know what it might mean to have Jesus as our savior. Wanting to know Jesus in relationship is different from wanting to know about Jesus as an abstracted purely individual person.

The relational question we bring means that we do not want to just know about Jesus as an individual but about Jesus-in-relationship. Jesus was not so different that people could not relate to him. Indeed, the gospel writers tell us that his sameness made it hard for his family and his neighbors to see why he was so important. The gospel writers make it clear that even those who did think he was important did not understand him very well either. Those who knew Jesus directly still had to start their understanding from the words and images already

in their minds. The New Testament talks a lot about Jesus as king and priest, among other things. What do such words mean when he was like no king or priest of his day?

Not only his immediate followers were confused. The meaning of Jesus as king has led to the misunderstanding of Triumphalism that afflicts the church to this day. The traditional sermons offered on this Christ the King Sunday commonly echo the Triumphalism celebrated in Handel's Messiah, the very misunderstanding that led Pilate to agree to the crucifixion of Jesus.

The gospel lesson in the lectionary pictures Pilate trying to figure out who Jesus was, who Jesus was claiming to be in relationship to others. He wanted to know if Jesus was claiming to be the King of the Jews. Such a claim would make Jesus a dangerous political radical in the eyes of Pilate and justify an order to crucify him. Jesus bandies questions and words with Pilate and refuses to make the claim. Part of the subtlety of Jesus here is that he emphasizes that he has no control over what others see in him. The strategy of Jesus only partly worked. Pilate finds no case against him but nonetheless is prepared to bend to the wishes of the temple leaders who oppose him.

We also know something important about Jesus from noting that the gospel writers all wrote about him as having aroused vigorous opposition from the temple leaders. They were sufficiently mad at Jesus to have him crucified. Jesus was enough like a king to upset Pilate, enough like a priest to upset the temple leaders.

The temple leaders were mad at Jesus because, like John the Baptist, he threatened to undercut the commitment of the Jewish masses to the central importance of temple worship. They were mad at him because he gave a new meaning to the understanding of priest, a meaning that left them disenfranchised from their calling, from their livelihood.

Instead of bringing sacrifices to the priests to be offered to appease God, they were being called to sacrifice themselves out of love for one another.

In the final accounting, people only have power as kings because people recognize them as kings and accord them the power that goes with such a role. Jesus redirects that recognition to seeing in each other, even in the lowliest among us, the dignity and significance of those whom we are called to serve. Jesus did not so much fight against Caesar, Herod Antipus or Pilate. He just stopped paying attention to them and directed us to build relationships with each other, to take care of each other, to love each other. Do we need to sort out the politics of Jesus?

Jesus healed the sick and forgave sin. Was it reasonable for the temple leaders to respond to him as a religious leader, as a dangerous heretic, as someone understood falsely as a priest? Do we need to sort out the healing and forgiving powers of Jesus? I plan to pick up such questions in later sermons.

The roles of king and priest were only a few thousand years old in Jesus' day because empires had only been begun a few thousand years ago and most of those empires had to make do without much writing. Empire was still very much an idea that was under development from the concept of tribe. The writing of Hebrew scripture, which tells us so much about ancient empires, was only about 700 years old in the time of Jesus, developed only after the Hebrew people could settle down in one place.

- About seven million years ago, give or take a couple of million years, human stock split off from ape stock. These earliest proto-humans lived in groups as hunters and gatherers, just like their ape cousins.
- By about two-and-a-half million years ago our ancestors started growing toward roughly our current size and

brain size. They lived in groups as hunters and gatherers.

- About half-a-million years ago, Homo sapiens were a distinct species and began to spread out of Africa to Europe and Asia. They lived as hunters and gatherers.
- By 130,000 years ago, Homo sapiens were hunters and gatherers using crude stone tools and expressing themselves in cave art.
- About 50,000 years ago, there was a *great leap forward*. Cro-Magnon people rather suddenly began using advanced stone tools, rope, clothing and houses. Perhaps it was a development of brain capacity and/or the development of speech that made the difference. In any case, this development apparently made possible, or perhaps was made possible by, the earliest beginnings of growing crops in the Fertile Crescent, the Bible lands we name now as Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Iran and Iraq.
- About 40,000 years ago, the Cro-Magnon people displaced the Neanderthals in Europe and Chinese were expanding to Australia and New Guinea.
- The early dominance of the Fertile Crescent was based on the power of emerging agriculture. Growing wheat and millet produced surplus food and required people to live in one place. There could be more specialization of roles and crafts because of the surplus food. There could be more accumulation of technology and wealth because people did not have to carry everything with them in the roving life of hunter/gatherer people. With this changed economy, people could begin living in groups larger than tribes and that required the conceptual and organizational glue supplied by kings and priests.
- About the time of Moses, we had the beginnings of written language, only 2000 or 3000 years before Jesus. The earliest language was an extension of accounting for food surpluses. By 700 years before Jesus, not only

managers but also religious leaders were using language extensively. Written language allowed for the development of rules and orthodoxy, and all that began to mean for the development of kingdoms and religions. Hebrew scriptures are a prominent example of such old writing. Within Hebrew scripture, we learn about what it was like to move from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. We read about what it was like for a nomadic and herding people to fight for living space with those who had cereal crops and iron and horses.

- The "bible" for Jesus contained the stories, rules and myths of some of the earliest writings about what kingdoms and religions should look like. Is it surprising that the picture is a bit chaotic and contradictory?
- Jesus lived right in the middle of the Fertile Crescent at the first climax of empire creation. The memories of the earliest kingdoms: Egypt, Babylonia and Persia were still bright. Only 400 years before Jesus, Alexander the Great had conquered all the known kingdoms from the Atlantic through India, and all of Africa that seemed worth the trouble. Alexander's empire soon broke into four pieces and the center of control moved westward from the Fertile Crescent toward Alexandria and Rome.
- After the breakup of Alexander's empire the area where Jesus was to be born was held by the Seleucid Kings of Syria. About 150 years before Jesus, the Maccabees, also known as the Hasmoneans, revolted against the Seleucids and created a semi-autonomous Palestine ruled by Jews. They began to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem – harking back to King David.
- Nevertheless, the political situation remained unstable. In 63 B.C.E. Pompey retook Jerusalem for Rome and ruled by cutting a deal with the Jews that amounted to a grant of religious freedom and limited political freedom in exchange for recognizing and supporting the Roman empire and paying Roman taxes.

- In 40 B.C.E., there was a Parthian invasion that captured Galilee, including Sepphoris the Roman capitol city of Galilee, which was right next door to Nazareth. Soon Rome recaptured Galilee and dealt harshly with the people of Sepphoris who were not sufficiently loyal to Rome.
- Then Herod the Great, a Hasmonean, wins some wars and in 37 B.C.E. reestablished a Jewish nation which is subservient to the Roman Empire, much like the deal struck earlier by Pompey with the Maccabees. Herod commences the building of the Temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in a big way. Ten thousand workers at a time are working on the temple, which is being supported, with a Jewish tax as well as some contributions by Roman leaders from the Roman tax being collected in the area.
- In 27 B.C.E., Augustus Caesar gained control and moved to greatly strengthen the grip of the Roman Empire. He is rightly known as the great Caesar. His establishment of the "Pax Romana" allowed an explosion of trade around the Mediterranean Sea. Herod the Great continued to rule in Judea, Samaria and Galilee as a subordinate leader under the Roman Empire. Jesus is born around 6 B.C.E. near the end of the reign of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.E.
- From 4 B.C.E. until after the death of Jesus, the kingdom of Herod the Great was split into three pieces by the divide and conquer strategy of the Roman Empire. Jesus grows up in Galilee under the rule of one of Herod's sons, Herod Antipus. Herod Antipus rebuilt Sepphoris as his capitol city, only a couple of miles from Nazareth. When Jesus was in his young 20's Herod Antipus moved his capitol eastward to Tiberias, named for the new Roman Emperor Tiberias who took over from Augustus Caesar in 14 B.C.E. At this time, Jerusalem is being ruled by a series of Prefects, direct appointees from Rome such as Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate has direct military control but priests and leaders used to

having authority under the deals cut by the Maccabees and Herod the Great are running most of the life of Jerusalem out of the temple. Issues of the prerogatives of church and state abounded as seen in the story of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

- Rome is in control and has the military muscle to back it up, but Rome is also over-extended and many things are not nailed down. The zealots are alive and well in Samaria and Galilee, carrying active memories of more political freedom based on the semi-successful rebellions of the Maccabees and the political maneuvering of the Herod's.
- There is enormous division and creativity in the Jewish world. The Pharisees have great strength. They recognize the temple but their strength is in the invention of congregational worship and the study of the Torah by any Jewish adult man who wanted to get involved, the forerunners of our church and Sunday school. The temple is still a dominant reality with every Jewish male required to pay a temple tax. However, there are divisions within the temple hierarchy, including political and doctrinal struggles that led to the starvation of some priests. The Essenes have withdrawn to the wilderness where they practice an extreme but withdrawn purity. There are also many just common everyday Jews who are too poor to meet the requirements of Pharisaic purity, and too poor to care much about the temple.
- In short, Jesus is living right in the middle of an oppressive, glorious and extremely chaotic high point of Western Civilization. He probably worked as a tecton, a construction worker, in Sepphoris and possibly Tiberias. He was exposed to the rich mix of Jewish intellectual debate as well as to a high point of contentious debate in the developments of Greek and Roman philosophy.

Jesus choose to align himself with John the Baptist and this

choice was a great embarrassment to the gospel writers who do their best to show why Jesus is greater than John and why people should follow the way of Jesus and not of John. Like John, Jesus emphasizes instant grace *as symbolized by baptism and exemplified by the instant forgiveness he offers during healing* moments. This outrages both the Pharisees and the temple leaders because it undercuts the legalistic approach to the Jewish laws and the need for sacrifices to appease God for one's sins. Some of the Zealots rally to him thinking he might be the base of a new revolution. Nevertheless, Jesus goes underneath the political and religious debates of the day and starts relating to the underclass he knows so well from being a tecton. Jesus grew up poorer than even a peasant who owns land or a fisherman who own a boat and nets.

The everyday poor, and there are a lot of them, respond to Jesus. They can understand that even without great structural changes in religion and government they can start living differently, and that living differently can matter. This is not merely individual professions of faith as the fundamentalists would have it, it is the informal spreading of a net of caring where people help each other out, the kind of community we see at Pentecost. It is the salvation of sharing that is captured in the story of the feeding of the 5000: Sharing food; Sharing health; Sharing lives; Embracing God in-between.

Jesus is the Christ, the center and meaning of history, because he lures us into being willing to embody the eternal of love and justice and beauty and compassion, directly experiencing the passion and fulfillment of living meaningful lives. He lures us into centering our identity and relationships in the ongoing meanings so nearby, so clouded by idols, so enticing and so full of fear, so consistent and so vulnerable.

Loving one another makes a difference and there is no reason to wait another minute before accepting the salvation that

comes from embodying this truth. It does not just change you. It changes the world. How about you? How about Seekers? How about now?