

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 17, 2019**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
WE BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST**

Matthew 16:13-16

In honor of Presidents' Day (which is tomorrow), here is a bit of presidential trivia about the two most celebrated Presidents in our nation's history, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, whose birthdays (February 12 for Lincoln and February 22 for Washington) are the reason we observe Presidents' Day in February.

Did you know that nearly 3,000 biographies have been written about George Washington? Which seems like a lot (and is!) until you consider that almost twice as many – nearly 6,000 – biographies have been written about Abraham Lincoln. While it is not strictly a biography, I've been reading a book by Stephen Mansfield entitled *Lincoln's Battle with God*. It is a kind of religious biography, chronicling Lincoln's understanding of, attitudes toward, struggles with, and faith (or lack of faith) in God in the different seasons of his life, from his childhood in Kentucky and Indiana through his presidency during the Civil War.

In total, some 16,000 books have been written about our 16th President – which is more, according to Paul Tetreault, Director of Ford's Theatre, than about any other person in world history, with the exception of Jesus Christ.

That more books have been written about Jesus than any other person should not surprise us, because Jesus *is* the pivotal, central figure who ever lived. Historian Paul Johnson begins his book *Jesus: A Biography from a Believer* with this statement: "Jesus of Nazareth was, in terms of His influence, the most important human being in history. He is also the most written about and discussed." After giving a brief summary of the development of the New Testament documents and other 1st-century writings about Jesus, Johnson says: "Today there are over one hundred thousand printed biographies of Jesus in English alone" (Johnson, *Jesus*, 1, 2).

Among them, in addition to Johnson's, are these:

- *The Jesus I Never Knew* by Philip Yancey;
- *Jesus: The Greatest Life of All* by Charles Swindoll;
- *Who is This Jesus?* By Michael Green;
- *The Man Christ Jesus* by Robert E. Speer, published in 1896. (From the late 19th century until his death in 1947, Speer was a leading advocate of world missions in the Presbyterian Church. The library at Princeton Seminary is named in his honor.)
- *Jesus: The One and Only* by Bible study teacher Beth Moore;
- *The Man Nobody Knows* by Bruce Barton, first published in 1925;
- *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* by Alfred Edersheim, published in two volumes in 1883; and

- *The Incomparable Christ* by John R. W. Stott, which is technically not a biography but an historical, theological, ecclesiological study of the person, work, and influence of Jesus.

In addition, there are historical novels in which Jesus plays a significant role, such as Lew Wallace's famous *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, which was made into one of the greatest movies of all time, and Fulton Oursler's *The Greatest Story Ever Told; A Tale of the Greatest Life Ever Lived*, first published in 1949 and made into a major Hollywood movie in 1965.

This plethora of books about Jesus would not have surprised the apostle John. In fact, he predicted it. This is what he says at the very end of his "biography" of Jesus in the Gospel of John: On top of everything else Jesus said and did that he (John) wrote about, "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

"In many ways – and in cultural and moral respects, especially," writes Johnson, "Jesus' life, and the faith it created, are the central events in the history of humanity, around which (everything) revolves" (Johnson, 2, 3).

Johnson, of course, is not alone in his assessment of the significance of Jesus. Michael Green affirms the unchanging belief of Christians around the world that still today, two thousand years after He walked this earth, Jesus remains the central figure in all of history. Which is all the more remarkable when you consider the facts of His life. Though you may not be familiar with the name James Allan Francis, you are probably familiar with what he has said of Jesus:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in still another village, where He worked in a carpenter's shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held office. He never had a family or owned a house. He did not go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where He was born. He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but Himself.

He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to His enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for His clothing, the only property He had on earth. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen [*now twenty*] centuries have come and gone, and today He remains the central figure of the human race, and the leader of humankind's progress. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments [*and congresses*] that ever sat, all the (monarchs) that ever reigned, *put together* have not affected the life of humankind on this planet so much as that one solitary life.

Despite its seeming ordinariness, this "one solitary life" was in reality the life of an extraordinary man who did extraordinary things and made an extraordinary claim. He

claimed to be God incarnate – God in flesh and blood. A man, yes. But more than a man. We believe Jesus was and is fully man (fully human) and fully God. Like the doctrine of the Trinity, the full humanity and full deity of Jesus is a mystery beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend it fully or human language to express the fullness of what it means. We believe that Jesus Christ, the eternal, pre-existent Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, as it says in the *EPC Essentials*, “became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth. He who is true God became true man united in one Person forever.”

During the 33 years of His life on earth, Jesus lived a totally sinless life, a life of complete and perfect righteousness before God the Father. In His humanness, Jesus was like us in every way, except that unlike each and every one of us – unlike each and every person who has ever lived – Jesus did not sin. There was no sin in Him. Not even the tiniest trace. There was *no sin* in Him. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus knows all about our weaknesses. He knows all about our temptations. He knows all about the tests and trials of this earthly life. He is able “to sympathize with our weaknesses” because He has been through it all. He “has been tempted in every way,” the Bible says, “just as we are.” The difference is that Jesus endured every temptation without ever sinning. Without ever giving in to the temptation to any kind of sin. Not even once.

As it says in the *Essentials*: “(Jesus) died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. On the third day He arose bodily from the dead, [and] ascended into heaven where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High [i.e., God the Father], He now is our High Priest and Mediator.”

This is how C. S. Lewis, in his classic *Mere Christianity*, describes the extraordinariness of the incarnation, of God Himself becoming a human being: “The Second Person in God, the Son, became human Himself: Was born into the world as an actual man – a real man of a particular height, with hair of a particular color, and eyes of a particular color as well, speaking a particular language [or more than one], weighing so many (pounds). The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that (an unborn baby) in a woman’s body” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 179). [Note: Lewis uses the term “fetus,” which I have replaced with “unborn baby.”]

The explosive claim of the New Testament regarding Jesus is that He was – *is* – fully man and fully God. Paul writes in Colossians 1:19 that “God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in (Jesus);” and in Colossians 2:9 that “in Christ all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form.” Or, as it says in *The Message*: “Everything of God gets expressed in Him.... You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ and the emptiness of the universe without Him” (Colossians 2:9-10, *MSG*).

This may all seem boringly elementary to you. You may have believed what I am saying about Jesus your whole life. I hope you will never doubt it or disbelieve it, because what you believe about Jesus and how to respond to Him will shape your life in the most consequential ways.

Throughout the history of the church, there have been controversies over the nature of Christ. One of the heresies (false teachings) the early Christian church had to confront was known as *Docetism*. The name *Docetism* comes from the Greek word *dokeo*, which means “to seem” or “to appear.” The essence of Docetism is the idea that, while Jesus was truly and fully God, He was not truly and fully human. Though He had a human body made of flesh and blood, He did not have a human mind or a human soul. He only *appeared* to be a man. He looked like a man. He walked like a man. He talked like a man. But He was not really a man.

On the other side is the heresy known as *Arianism*, named for a 4th-century church leader named Arius who taught that Jesus was not truly and fully divine. Arius had a high view of Jesus, but not high enough. He believed Jesus was not God, but was instead the first, greatest, and most exalted of all God’s creatures. He taught, concerning Jesus, that “there was a time when He was not” – a time when Jesus did not exist. In other words, Arius denied that Jesus is the eternally existing Son of God, co-equal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

I suspect there are a lot of people in the world today who say they believe in Jesus but, like Arius or the Docetists, have a faulty, defective view of either the humanity or deity of Jesus.

How the Christian church dealt with these ideas is ancient history. Some of you are probably familiar with it. In the year 325 AD, the Church Council of Nicea formally rejected the teaching of Arius and affirmed the full deity of Jesus Christ. A subsequent Church Council meeting in Constantinople in 381 AD formally rejected Docetism and affirmed the full humanity of Jesus. Yet another Church Council, this one in 451 AD at Chalcedon, declared that “the one and only Son [of God], our Lord Jesus Christ, is perfect in Godhead and perfect in humanity, truly God and truly human, of one substance (*homoousios*) with us as man” (Quoted in John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 84).

One way to gain a better understanding of who Jesus is and why Jesus matters is to consider some of the names or titles ascribed to Jesus in the Bible. Which is one reason why I chose this passage from Matthew 16 in which Jesus first asks His disciples what people are saying about Him. Mostly, people thought He was a prophet. This makes sense, given that Jesus acted a lot like an Old Testament prophet. Interestingly, they didn’t view Jesus as a *new* prophet like the prophets of old, but an *old* prophet come back to life.

In thinking of Jesus this way, the regular people of Jesus’ day were partly right and partly wrong. They were wrong in this respect: Jesus *was not* “the reappearance of the executed John the Baptist, or the past and expected Elijah, or the venerated Jeremiah” (F. Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-18, 2nd and revised edition*, 120). But they were right in this respect: Jesus *was* a prophet. A prophet is a person who speaks for God. A prophet is a person who speaks God’s words to His people and to the world. A prophet is a person who speaks on behalf of God.

Without a doubt, Jesus was a prophet. But He was – and is – more than a prophet. In addition to the office of prophet, Jesus also holds and fulfills the offices of priest and king. As our great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16), Jesus intercedes with God the Father on our behalf. He is our advocate, our defense attorney who represents us before the Father (1 John

2:1). As our priest, Jesus offered Himself – once for all time and for all people – as the perfect, atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:2). Jesus is also our king. He is *the King* who rightly rules as sovereign over all things. As the Bible says in Hebrews 2:8: “At present we do not see everything subject to (Jesus).” His kingship is not yet evident everywhere in this world. His kingdom *has* come, though it has not yet *fully* come. But the day will come when His rule over all things – over every nation and all of creation – will be clearly established. Until then, He continues to reign as King in the hearts and lives of all who know Him as Savior and Lord. And with the apostle John, we say: “*Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20).

As is the case today, many people in Jesus’ day had good thoughts about Jesus. It is just that their thoughts were not exactly right. A prophet, yes. A wise teacher, yes. A good man, yes. A godly man, yes. Even a miraculous healer. But Jesus was more than all of these. Jesus *is* more than all of these.

[Portions of the preceding four paragraphs are adapted and expanded from Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 445-446.]

After hearing what other people thought of Him, Jesus probes further to find out what His own disciples thought: “Who do *you* say I am?” He asked them in verse 15 (emphasis added).

Peter, as usual, speaks up first and says: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16).

To which Jesus replies in the next verse: “You got it, Peter! That’s the right answer! You didn’t figure this out on your own. It was revealed to you by my Father in heaven” (16:17).

You see, you can know everything there is to know about Jesus. You can know the story of His life forward and backward. You can know all about His suffering and death. Even His resurrection from the dead. You can know it all without ever coming to know Him for who He is.

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Christ? Contrary to what some people think, “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. It is a title, not a name. The Greek word *Christos* corresponds to the Hebrew *Messiah*. Both words mean “Anointed One.” The Jewish people, some more expectantly than others, were awaiting the arrival of the promised Messiah, the Lord’s “Anointed One,” to deliver His people from the dominion of Rome and establish a kingdom of peace and prosperity for Israel. Most Jews were looking for this kind of political Messiah. On several occasions, including this one with His disciples in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus told those who understood in one way or another what it meant to call Him “Messiah” or “the Christ” not to go around telling other people that He was the Messiah (see 16:19). Why? Because most people in His day had the wrong idea about the meaning of His Messiahship.

Because of this popular misconception, “Christ” is not a title Jesus actively applied to Himself. Yet, more than 50 times in the four Gospels, and more than 280 times in the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the Messiah or Christ (Green, 55). Jesus consciously knew Himself as the Lord’s “Anointed One,” sent into this world on a mission from God the Father – a mission of love, a rescue mission, to deliver His people not from their political circumstances or their subjection to Rome, but from their spiritual captivity to sin and guilt. Jesus came to show us, up close and personal, what God is like. He came to teach, to heal, to forgive, to love, to redeem us from our sins, and to bring us back into fellowship with God the Father.

Peter and the other disciples certainly didn’t understand it all when Peter made his great confession. But he would understand it more and more as time went by.

When we confess Jesus as the Christ or Messiah, we affirm that He was and is the chosen, anointed, commissioned instrument of God to deliver us from our captivity to sin by the voluntary offering up of His life in our place, as a sacrifice for our sins. As the Lord’s Anointed, Jesus did for us what no one else could do, because He was God in flesh and blood, at the same time fully God and fully man.

In addition to confessing Jesus as the Messiah, Peter also declared Jesus to be “the Son of the living God” (16:16). It was a simple but unequivocal affirmation of the deity or divinity or God-ness of Jesus.

Just as no single book (or all the books in the world) could ever explain everything there is to know about the person and work of Jesus, so no single sermon (or all the sermons ever preached) could ever contain the fullness of the truth of the gospel. This message is no exception. So we’ll continue to explore what we believe about Jesus next Sunday.

Most of you are probably familiar with the famous quote by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* to the effect that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or the Son of God. I want to leave you today with a different but similar quote from a more contemporary source, one that may surprise you. This is from Paul David Hewson, who is better known as Bono, the lead singer of the Irish band U2. Here is what he has said about Jesus:

“I think a defining question for a Christian is: Who was Christ? And I don’t think you’re let off easily by saying a great thinker or a great philosopher, because actually He went around saying He was the Messiah. That’s why He was crucified. He was crucified because He said He was the Son of God. So, He either, in my view, was the Son of God, or He was ... nuts. Forget rock ‘n’ roll messianic complexes, this is like Charlie Manson type delirium. And I find it hard to accept that millions and millions of lives, half the earth, for two thousand years have been touched, have felt their lives touched and inspired by some nutter.”

One thing I know: Jesus was no “nutter.” Jesus did not suffer from a messianic complex; He *was* and *is* the Messiah, the Christ. He was a prophet, but more than a prophet. More than a good man. More than a godly man. More than a great teacher or philosopher. He was and is the Son of God and Savior of sinners, truly and fully God, and truly and fully man.

He is the central figure in all of history. His “one solitary life” has made more difference in the world than the rest of the world’s most powerful people put together. What you believe about Him and what you do with Him – or, I should say, what you let Him do with your life – will matter more than anything else.

Who do you say Jesus is? “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.