

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### SERMON SERIES: Rushing to Christmas!

(Jesus themes)

### **Who is This Jesus?**

(John 1)

Study #1

**Introduction:** The reason for the season...

Well, now that we are well into December, it's high time I wished you a Merry Christmas. So, Merry Christmas!

Shopping and parties and busyness and friends and family fill our calendars at this season.

And yet, underneath all of that, behind all of that, and beyond all of that we know that shopping and parties is not the point of it all. The point of it all is to remember the Baby who was born two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. Jesus is the reason for the season.

And if Jesus is the reason for the season, it's pretty important for us to focus our attention on Him. To think about Him and to be sure we know who He is. In fact, the most important question at this time of year may be the simple one: "*Who is Jesus?*"

Through the centuries, literally thousands of books have been written addressing this question. I've got quite a few books on my own shelves devoted to the question, "*Who is Jesus?*"

And despite all the attention paid to Jesus, there continues to be an almost non-stop confusion as to his identity.

Some asked the question, "*Who is Jesus?*" while He was alive and came to radically different conclusions. Many still ask the question today - and still come to radically different conclusions.

Certainly, those outside the church struggle to categorize Him.

PBS's "Frontline" has placed their four hour documentary - **From Jesus to Christ** - online so that anyone can view it anytime they wish. That production theorizes that Jesus was a very inspiring Jewish leader - but no more than that. **From Jesus to Christ** concludes that Jesus' enthusiastic followers elevated Him to the status of deity.

In recent decades others have described Him as a prophetic voice, a cultural revolutionary, a profound ethical teacher, a pacifist - and more.

But it is not only those outside the church who have wrestled with His identity. The church has had to grapple with the question, too. And the church's grappling with Jesus has been intense!

Some, from as early as the first century, affirmed that Jesus was God, but denied that He was human.<sup>1</sup> Others from the same era affirmed that Jesus was a man, but denied that He was God.<sup>2</sup>

Some believed that He was truly and fully human and only partly God<sup>3</sup>, while others said that He was truly and fully divine, but only partly human.<sup>4</sup>

And then there were those who believed that He was fully God and fully man, but that He was actually two persons in one body,<sup>5</sup> and others who held that Jesus had one mixed (up!) nature and was neither fully human nor fully divine, but sort of a 50/50 mix!<sup>6</sup>

Woah!

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<sup>1</sup> The Docetists.

<sup>2</sup> The Ebionites

<sup>3</sup> The Arians

<sup>4</sup> The Apollinarians

<sup>5</sup> The Nestorians

<sup>6</sup> The Eutychians

You've probably heard your share of opinions about Jesus' identity. You may have engaged in long conversations, late night bull sessions, or even arguments about Him.

And your own opinions about Him may have changed through the years. You may not yet be settled in your understanding of Jesus' identity.

If you are settled or if you are not, you'll enjoy these next three Sundays. Since Jesus is the reason for the season, on this Sunday and the next and the next we will be looking at Jesus themes, seeking to get a grip on this amazing Person.

On the Sunday before Christmas (December 21), it seems only right that we look at the story of His birth, so we will. But I'll point out some things about His birth that you may not have seen before, some of the more interesting "uglies" of Christmas.

Next Sunday, I plan to explore Jesus' life as an exercise in "downward mobility," a career path that lots of Americans are taking these days, but one that Jesus chose for Himself on purpose.

And today, I want us to examine the best record of information we have about Jesus, the Bible, and devote ourselves to answering this one simple question, "*Who is Jesus?*"

## **True Humanity**

### **Jesus: Man or "superman"?**

There is no question that Jesus is a watershed figure in human history.

Time divides into BC (before Christ) and AD (*anno domini* - Latin for "in the year of our Lord").

Culturally, His fingerprints are everywhere. That is not only true in the United States but in countless countries around the world. The personality of Jesus towers over humanity. And, with apologies to Dos Equis beer, **HE** is the world's most interesting Man!

Given all of that, it is sometimes tempting to think of Him as a "more than human" human being. Sort of a "superman" without the cape.

Or, it may be just as tempting to think of Him as not quite human.

But a survey of Jesus' life, recorded by eyewitnesses to the events, reveals Him to be extraordinarily human.

We read of His very human development in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel.

### **Proof Positive of Jesus' Humanity**

*He developed in a perfectly normal way*

***[Luke 2:40] The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him...[52] And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.***

He grew up in a pretty normal Jewish family in the first century in Palestine. He and His family regularly went to the synagogue for worship and to the Temple in Jerusalem.

He studied the Scriptures, as every Jewish youth of His day would have done.

And, while we have no record of it, we can safely assume that He had friends, that He played, that He laughed and that He cried.

He developed from infancy through the toddler years to childhood, through adolescence to adulthood in a perfectly normal, human way.

*He possessed crucial human traits*

And He had all the crucial traits that make a human a human.

Possessing a human body and mind, He thought rationally and took voluntary action to do things - just like you and I do.

Read through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and you'll be impressed with the richness of Jesus' emotional life. He demonstrated the capacity for anger (cleansing the Temple of buyers and sellers), joy (at the return of the seventy from their mission trip), frustration (He asked His disciples, "How long must I put up with you?!") and love (healing the sick; with children).

*He did things that humans do*

And, He had the limitations that humans have. At the end of a long day, He was tired and sleepy. After not eating, He grew hungry and thirsty. The Bible tells us that He was tempted to sin.

And then, to cap off all, Jesus knew intimately those two universal human experiences. He died and He was born.

*He was BORN*

We can set the date of His death with near certain accuracy. He died in Jerusalem on Friday, April 3, AD 33 (at 3 in the afternoon!).

The date of His birth is less certain. But it was almost certainly in the winter of 5/4 BC.<sup>7</sup>

We sometimes confuse the issue by the way we speak of Jesus "coming down from Heaven." While in a very important sense that is true, it is just as true that Jesus was **born**.

He was born of a woman, Mary, in a stable, in the small village of Bethlehem, in the land of Palestine, during the reign of King Herod.

There was absolutely nothing supernatural about His birth. There is no reason to believe that He emerged from Mary's womb after a painless labor, with a special halo, or sporting a knowing grin.

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<sup>7</sup> The issues of chronology are dealt with in Harold Hoehner's book, Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Zondervan, 1977. There was no year "0". We know that Jesus was born sometime after the census of Quirinius (Luke 2:1-5) and that He was born before Herod's death, both of which dates are fixed.

**Summary:** Plain and simple, Jesus was born, lived and died a human being. Examine all the evidence there is and we arrive at the conclusion that Jesus was 100% human.

And to that "what" we ask the all-important, "So what?"

**So what?**

*1. The role model we've always wanted.*

First, Jesus, the man, gave us an example of a holy life. The life of Jesus is the life you've always wanted.

He demonstrated what it is to be a human being fully submitted to God, wholly devoted to God, loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength - and His neighbors as Himself.

Jesus, the man, is the **role model** we've always wanted. And Jesus, the man, is the **advocate** we've always needed.

*2. The helpful advocate we've always needed.*

There is no temptation you have faced or are facing that Jesus did not face.

Of course, He didn't face the exact temptation you may face of cutting or speeding on the highway or viewing online porn.

But I have no trouble believing that Jesus faced the temptation to break laws, to sin sexually, and to doubt His amazing made-in-the-image-of-God glory that we may face today.

His perfect humanity assures you that He knows what you are going through. He knows. He cares.

And because we believe that He is human AND MORE THAN HUMAN we also understand that He comes alongside of you with tender strength to help you in your weakness resist temptation to sin.

That thought, that Jesus is human AND MORE THAN HUMAN, prompts the second part of our investigation into the question, “*Who is Jesus?*”

### Veiled Deity

#### Skepticism about Jesus’ Deity

Saying, “Jesus is human”, while true, doesn’t say it all. The data we have on His life simply doesn’t square with the normal picture of a human being.

That’s why, for two thousand years, Christians have said - sometimes way too matter-of-factly, “*Jesus is God.*”

Think about that. “Jesus is God.” What an outlandish statement!

From everything we read in the Bible, He looked exactly human. There was nothing “glow in the dark” about Jesus.

Yet Christianity claims that He is God. Why? Well, for one thing, He actually claimed to be God.

#### Proof Positive of Jesus’ Deity

*He claimed to be God (John 10:30)*

Once, when He was speaking to some of the religious rulers of His day, He was talking about the security of the person who places trust in Him for salvation.

He said that the believer is secure because He, Jesus, is holding that believer in His mighty hand. Further, Jesus’ Father’s mighty hand envelopes even Jesus’ hand, making the believer doubly secure.

Then Jesus said, ***[John 10:30] I and the Father are one.***

At that moment, the Jewish leaders who were listening to Him picked up stones to kill Him because they understood Him to be saying that He, standing right in front of them, **WAS GOD.**

Now of course saying that you are God doesn’t make you God. But you would think that if you are God, you would say you are.

You would also, though, need to back up such a claim with action. And Jesus backed up His claims to be God.

*He did the things that God does*

He walked on water. He opened the eyes of a man who had never seen. He fed thousands by multiplying fish and loaves. He made the lame walk. He cleansed lepers. He healed the sick. He cast out demons. He calmed a storm on the sea. He raised the dead.

These miracles are evidence that Jesus was more than man.

And those who came in contact with Him recognized Him, not as someone special, not as a really neat guy, but as God.

*He was recognized as God by others*

A ROMAN CENTURION (MATTHEW 27:54)

A Roman centurion saw the earthquake, the darkened sky and other phenomenon at the time of His death and, becoming very frightened (Roman centurions were not famous for becoming very frightened) and said, ***“Truly this was the Son of God.”***

MARTHA, SISTER OF LAZARUS (JOHN 11:27)

A few days before He was killed, Jesus entered the home of His good friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus after Lazarus had died. Martha pulled Jesus aside to talk, and declared, ***“Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”***

DEMONS (MARK 3:11)

Throughout His career, Jesus encountered powerful forces of the enemy, demons. He would usually cast the demons out of the people they were tormenting with a word. But as they were leaving the demons would often cry out, ***“You are the Son of God!”***

There were many others who saw what these saw. One of these was one of His disciples, John, who became convinced of Jesus' deity.

THE APOSTLE JOHN (JOHN 1:34)

***“I myself have seen, and have testified that this (Jesus) is the Son of God.”***

That's a bold statement. Very confident. And by way of conclusion this morning, I'd like to turn a corner, open up to the first chapter of John's Gospel, and listen as John tells us the Christmas story.

His telling of Christmas is way different than Matthew's telling or Luke's. But John's telling of the Christmas story opens our eyes to who Jesus is in ways that Matthew's and Luke's don't.

He starts off by introducing us to something he calls the WORD.

### **A “WORD” from Our Creator...**

#### **An Intro to “WORD” (vv. 1-5)**

*The WORD and God (vv. 1-2)*

***[1] In the beginning was the Word<sup>8</sup>, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.<sup>9</sup> [2] He was in the beginning with God.***

We hear the word “WORD” and think, “*Huh. A word.*” No big deal.

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<sup>8</sup> John was steeped in the Old Testament much more than in Greek culture. Many read this passage and see in John's comments about the “Word” reference to the Greek religious idea of the logos, which was the secret of wisdom among the mystery religions. John, though, would have had an entirely different idea in mind when he made mention of the “Word!”

<sup>9</sup> Some groups translate verse 1 “and the Word was A God” because there is no definite article before the word “God.” However, Colwell's Rule, a standard rule of Greek grammar, answers this issue. The rule states that in Greek, definite nouns (like “God”) which precede the verb regularly lack the article and should be translated as if they have one. The correct translation of this phrase is, ***“And the Word was God.”***

But, when John's first century audience heard, ***“In the beginning was the Word”***?<sup>10</sup> they would have sat up and taken notice.

Two ideas would have instantly come to their minds. **First**, they would have thought “*creation.*”

How was the world created? By the WORD of God. God spoke into the darkness at the very beginning and said, ***“Let there be light”*** - and there was light! He spoke six times and the universe in its fullness appeared.

When John says, ***“In the beginning was the Word”*** we should think of the creative energy of God.

**Second**, they would have thought, “*revelation.*” One of the most often repeated phrases in the prophets' writings is, ***“The WORD of the Lord came to”*** Isaiah/Jeremiah/Ezekiel/Hosea/etc...

When we hear “WORD”, we should think of the revelation of God. We are going to learn something about God from the WORD.

John takes us back to the VERY beginning of all that there is, and says that the WORD was already there! The WORD did not begin to be in the beginning. At the earliest moment you can imagine, the WORD had already existed for an eternity.

The WORD is also in relationship with God. ***“...and the Word was WITH God.”*** That tells us that there is a separation between the WORD and God.

I can only have a relationship with someone separate from me. The WORD and God existed together from the beginning.

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<sup>10</sup> We may be tempted to substitute “Jesus” for “Word” in the Prologue. But, John put “Word” in the place of Jesus' Name for a reason. There is nothing to link Jesus with the Word until we get much farther into the passage. We would do well to try - as much as is possible - to let John develop his theme without mentally “skipping ahead,” and substituting “Jesus” for “Word.”

But, John continues (and this is the part that will give you a migraine), ***“The Word was God.”*** While there is separation between the WORD and God, there is also equality between the WORD and God.

The WORD was God. Not “godly.” Not “god-like.” Not “a god.” GOD. The Almighty. Period.

John goes on.

*The Word and Creation* (vv. 3-5)

THE WORD: CREATOR (v. 3)

***[3] All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.***<sup>11</sup>

So, not only was the WORD **with** God before creation (how’s that for a mind-blowing thought - “before creation”), when it came time to create, the WORD was the active agent that brought it all about. There has never been anything created without the WORD’S active involvement.

The WORD was there in Genesis 1, moving over the unformed void with the Spirit of God before creation. The WORD actively participated in creation.

SUSTAINER & ILLUMINATOR (v. 4A)

***[4a] In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.***

To say, ***“In Him*** (i.e. - the Word) ***was life”*** is a mouthful.

I am alive. You are alive. Living things - plant, animal, and human - are all around us. But all the life we see on planet earth is **dependent** life.

Plants depend on carbon dioxide, light, and water to live. You and I are dependent on food, water, and air to live.

But not the WORD. The WORD has an independent life. Before there was any creation to sustain life, the WORD lived. The WORD depends on nothing for its life.

And the life of the WORD serves humanity as a lighthouse, directing us to its life.

SHINES IN THE DARKNESS (v. 5)

***[5] And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.***

My version of the Bible translates verse 5, ***“...and the darkness did not comprehend it*** (i.e. - the WORD’S light).”

While an OK translation, I much prefer Eugene Peterson’s rendering in The Message<sup>12</sup>, ***“The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn’t put it out.”***<sup>13</sup>

It is the nature of light to dispel darkness. Light, by definition, is more powerful than darkness. Turn on a light in any dark room and the darkness flees.

And the light that the WORD shines is powerful enough to shine through and overwhelm the darkness of human sin, misery, and pain. Human darkness is never so dark that the WORD’S light won’t break through!

So, John has introduced us to the WORD. The WORD is a personal, eternal, creative, cosmic life force.

Then John brings us from outer space crashing back in to the flesh and blood world of daily life.

<sup>12</sup> The English Standard Version has something similar.

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word that my translation (NASB) renders “comprehend” is *katalambanw*, a military term that speaks of conquest. In some contexts, though, it can refer to the mental grasp of a subject.

<sup>11</sup> See Colossians 1:17, where we read, ***“in Him all things hold together”*** and Hebrews 1:3, ***“and He upholds all things by the word of His power.”***

## The WORD'S Prequel: John the Baptist (vv. 6-8)

*[6] There came a man, sent from God, whose name was John.<sup>14</sup>  
[7] He came for a witness, that he might bear witness of the light, that all might believe through him. [8] He was not the light, but came that he might bear witness of the light.*

This is the beauty and the uniqueness of Christianity. It is based in history.

We read about “John.” This is John the Baptist. John was a wild man dressed in animal skins and eating locusts and honey. He is one of the most compelling characters in the Bible.

He bursts onto the scene by the Jordan River calling people to baptism and repentance. Living in the desert area around Jerusalem, John is all authenticity, zeal, and zest for God!

But John was not the star of the show. He came to bear witness to the WORD.

Now, like many of you, I’ve studied law over the years. I cut my teeth on L.A. Law, moved on to advanced studies with The Practice, and now take occasional refresher courses in Law & Order. Through our TV coursework, we’ve all learned that the role of the witness is very important.

It was the same in the first century world of Judaism. Witnesses were brought to trial to give testimony.

Then, as now, witnesses staked their reputations and their futures on the testimony they gave. John the Baptist staked his life on the testimony he gave concerning the WORD.

This cosmic Word to which John testified, though, is also rooted in history.

## Merry Christmas! The Word INCARNATE (vv. 9-14)

*The true light REJECTED! (vv. 10-11)*

*[9] There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. [10] He (the Word) was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. [11] He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.*

There was a time when the light was not present in the world. Then, light entered.

Every man, woman, and child on whom this light shines is “enlightened.”

The light that the WORD shines makes impact. It’s not a ten watt night light. It’s a million candlepower beam that shines on dark places and dispels darkness!

And the light which is the shining of the WORD is a Person, just as real and historical a person as John the Baptist!

*“HE was in the world. HE made the world. The world did not know HIM. HE came to HIS own people. HIS own people did not receive HIM.”*

When the Word came to earth to shine, He did not come as an alien. He came as the Creator.

When the Word came to His people, He did not come as a foreigner. He came home to the people of God, to the nation that had been chosen and blessed by God.

The identity of the WORD is coming clearer. We can’t resist the temptation to make the identification between “the WORD” “the Light” and Jesus!

Jesus was profoundly rejected. Everybody rejected Him. Jews and Romans alike. His entire life was one experience after another of

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<sup>14</sup> Remember the miraculous circumstances of John’s birth, having been born to the barren Elizabeth, announced by the angel to the father, Zacharias, at the temple who was then struck dumb for his unbelief. John was truly a man sent from God!

rejection.<sup>15</sup> He didn't force Himself on anyone, not even His own people. And He was rejected by most.

But, those who saw that Jesus was the WORD - the creative energy and the revelation of God - found LIFE in Him.

*The true Light RECEIVED! (vv. 12-13)*

***[12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name<sup>16</sup>, [13] who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.***

There is nothing any of us can do to earn eternal life. All we are asked to do, all we can do, is place the treasure of our trust in Jesus for salvation.

TRUST, is the only response required to God's offer of eternal life. And people who trust Him, who receive Him, are those who are born of God.

Today we've traced the WORD'S story from creation in eternity past, to a birth at Bethlehem when the light first shined, to Calvary where the light was rejected.

But the end of the story of the Word is not the tragedy of rejection. It is the glorious story of grace.

*The Word became Flesh (v. 14)*

***[14] And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten<sup>17</sup> from the Father, full of grace and truth.***

This is the most outrageous and welcomed truth in Scripture. The Word - eternal, Creator, God - became flesh.

It is the most concise telling of the Christmas story in the Bible, the clearest statement of the Incarnation we'll ever hear.

This is the heart of Christianity: That the Word of God took on flesh for man's salvation, in the man Jesus Christ.

During the three years John spent as an apostle of Jesus, he was watching the WORD, Incarnate. He saw the WORD walking the streets of Nazareth and the roads of Judah, watched the WORD'S healing hands, heard the WORD'S life-giving messages.

And, everywhere Jesus went, He – the eternal WORD – displayed the glorious grace of God.

When we think of beholding God's glory, you (like me) probably think of miracles, spectacular shows of power, and laser light shows!

But, in all human history, the glory of God has been most clearly seen in the flesh and blood life of the God/man, Jesus of Nazareth.

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<sup>15</sup> In His earliest days, the Jewish leaders didn't make the effort to travel the 7 miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see Jesus, even though the rumor mill had it that the Messiah had been born. In His earthly ministry, the Jews were continually holding Him at arm's length and rejecting His teaching. Finally, their rejection culminated in having Him put to death on Calvary's cross.

<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare said, "That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Not so in the ancient world. The "name" stood for the person. Believing in the Name of Jesus is believing in the Person of Jesus.

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<sup>17</sup> The Word is the "only begotten." The word "only begotten means "unique." While believers are children of God, there is no one else in all of creation who holds the unique place in God's family that Jesus does, as the Word. He alone proceeded from the Father. The word is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament (a translation of the Hebrew known as the Septuagint) in Judges 11:34 to describe a person without brothers or sisters.



## **Conclusion:**

So, back to our original question: Who is Jesus?

- He is fully God and fully man.
- He existed in eternity past and was born in Bethlehem.
- He was tempted in all things, yet sinless.
- He is the ultimate communication of God's holiness, grace, and love, and the Lord who alone can offer eternal salvation to the one who trusts Him and Him alone.

As John says, ***[16] For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. [17] For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. [18] No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.***

On the day you trust Jesus for your salvation, you pass from darkness into light. The angels jump up and down and shout, "*He is forgiven! He is forgiven! How wild is that?!*"

So the question to you today is simple - and simply the most important question you will ever face:

Are you trusting in the God/man, the Lord Jesus Christ today?

If so, wonderful. You are a child of God!

If not, will you trust Him - today? If you do, you will find forgiveness for your sin, peace for your troubled heart, and a home for your eternal soul.