

*One of Us*  
#1 in *IMAGES OF JESUS*  
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February 25, 2004 — Ash Wednesday

### **Introduction to the Evening Lesson**

Sometime last fall Merrie and I were talking with Bill Dornbush about television shows and he mentioned seeing an interesting program on Friday nights called “Joan of Arcadia.” So we watched that show the next Friday and have been watching it with fascination ever since.

The main character is Joan Girardi, a typical teenager living in Arcadia, California. A typical teenager, at least, until just like the famous Joan of Arc, God starts talking to Joan of Arcadia — literally. And God always talks to her in the “image” of an ordinary person — a teacher, a security guard, a punk heavy-metal dude, a gardener, the lunch lady at school, a six-year-old girl, a cute guy on the bus.

So the notion of how God appears to us or speaks to us has been knocking around in my head for a few months now and some of those thoughts are going to bounce out in these sermons during Lent about our images of Jesus. How is it that we picture Jesus? What does Jesus look like in our minds and hearts? What does he sound like? I’m not so interested in how we imagine Jesus’ physical appearance though that is an interesting question. I want to think more about how we form a “concept” of him or a “concept” of God.

Of course, the Bible itself has many images for God. God appears in a burning bush to Moses. In a pillar of fire or cloud to the wandering Israelites. As a still, small voice to Elijah. Jesus speaks of himself as a mother hen who would gather her chicks or as a shepherd who takes care of his sheep. And beyond the Bible, Christians have for twenty centuries imagined Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit in all kinds of ways. Pictures, icons, symbols, images: tens of thousands of different ideas and concepts about what Jesus is like and how he expresses God to us. So in these Lenten sermons we’re going to grapple with some ancient and some modern images of Jesus.

Typically in a sermon series like this, a preacher might portray this, that, or another image of God and then say how funny, ridiculous, improbable, or wrong such pictures are. Then the preacher might say or imply that now he’ll show you the REAL Jesus, the one you ought to believe in. Will the real Jesus please stand up?

I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to do that because we all have images of Jesus and they are never all going to be the same. Even people outside the church and with no claim of being Christians have images of Jesus. And we all see through the lenses of our human viewpoints. While it is my responsibility and burden to speak for Jesus at least within this congregation, I don’t want to imply that MY Jesus is the real Jesus, because I look through a lens too. And I won’t see Jesus the same way you do.

But I want us all to look and look again with new eyes. For when we look in faith, I believe Jesus will make himself known. So in the words of a song from a 1970s movie about Jesus, I hope these sermons will help us to see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly, day by day.

2 Corinthians 5.14-21 (NRSV)

For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore

all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

### Jesus Is One of Us

The theme song of “Joan of Arcadia” is a mid-1990s hit song by Joan Osborne called “What If God Was One of Us.” The chorus of that song goes:

What if God was one of us,  
Just a slob like one of us,  
Just a stranger on the bus,  
Trying to find his way home.

For those of us who worship Jesus as Lord, we may grimace a bit at the image of “a slob like one of us.” And yet the images of the song evidence a curiosity and even a fascination with Jesus that sometimes we who spend so much time in church neglect. There are a lot of people not regularly in church who still think and wonder about God.

So what if God was one of us. Don’t use the word “slob” if you like, but what if God were just an ordinary human being? Of course, that image is central to how Christians see Jesus. In Jesus, God *IS* one of us. In fact, the apostle Paul makes an amazing claim in tonight’s text. Paul affirms that in Jesus God not only became human. Jesus literally became sin for us. “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Now there’s an image of God should shake us up a bit.

“All this is from God,” Paul says. God was at work reconciling the irreconcilable. For the ugly truth, the truth we don’t like to admit, is that on its own humanity is in perpetual mutiny against God. This is not just about doing bad things. It is about being bad. The human condition is a sinful condition. Yet the happy truth is that God has already overcome this. In Christ God has become a sinner just like us — a slob just like us — and by doing that reconciled us to himself.

That’s what Paul meant by saying Christ was “made to be sin.” Jesus Christ, God incarnate, the One without sin, was made to be sin. However we define what separates humans from God, Jesus became that. He became the hurt that separates lovers. He became the fear and hatred that separate races. He became the evil that in the soul’s bitter alchemy bubbles up as pride, greed, and lust. Jesus Christ became sin.

By Jesus doing this, humans became righteous. He took our place as sinners that we might take his place as righteous before God. As one writer said, “Paul has chosen this exceptional wording in order to emphasize the ‘sweet exchange’ whereby sinners are given a righteous status before God

through the righteous one who absorbed their sin (and its judgment) in himself.”<sup>1</sup> Christ brought together what is naturally not together. That’s reconciliation and when that image starts to work in us we can live lives that are also reconciling.

Let me give you a picture of reconciliation that I found when I was recently browsing through an old file folder. It’s a picture of a dinner table at a hotel restaurant in Cincinnati. I was at a meeting working on some project for the General Assembly Council. Around that table were eight people:

- Carol, a white woman from a farming community in California;
- Howard, a black government worker from Philadelphia;
- Masaya, a Japanese man from Chicago, pastoring a Japanese Presbyterian church in Orange County, California;
- Karen, a Hispanic woman, a student at McCormick Theological Seminary;
- Deborah, a black woman who is a minister and seminary teacher;
- Rich, a white man pastoring a church on Long Island, New York;
- Phyllis, a white woman working in the Presbyterian Center in Louisville;
- and me.

There was more diversity around that table than I normally see. In many ways we had very little in common. In another way, because of Jesus Christ we had everything in common.

We had a very pleasant dinner that evening as we talked about the work that brought us together. But it wasn’t our common task or a pleasant dinner that held us together. Nor was it the fact that we were all Presbyterians or all working on the same committee. What held us together was an image of Jesus.

You see, black and white and brown and yellow do not just naturally sit down in this world to pleasant table fellowship. Extreme racial tension and fear still divide our world.

Even men and women do not always sit down to pleasant table fellowship. We hide the tensions between the genders fairly well. But just below the surface are all manner of abuses, inequalities, suspicions, and hurts. We see the tension in some marriages, certainly in divorce, in the working world and political realm, and certainly we see it globally when we realize that the most desperate of the poor are always women and children. We even see the tensions in the church though often we don’t speak about them.

There were other differences around that table that might naturally keep us apart. For prejudice and hatred divide the world and we do not naturally come together. But God reconciles what is irreconcilable because God became one of us. We were together around that table because of what Jesus has done for us.

That’s why the text said we no longer think of Jesus from a human point of view. Now that’s a bad translation of a complicated Greek phrase which literally means “according to the flesh” (κατὰ σαρκά). But it’s a bad translation because saying we no longer look at Jesus from a human

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians, New Century Bible* (London: Oliphants, 1971) 211.

viewpoint is silly.<sup>2</sup> Humans cannot look at Jesus or anything else from other than a human viewpoint. We look through our human lenses or viewpoints. We cannot step outside our human minds to look at things in a non-human way.

But with that phrase Paul means that we really need to look at what Jesus has done as *God's way with the world*. By becoming us, by becoming sin, Jesus shows that all are beloved of God. When we start to see that, then we can start to be reconciled across all the things that separate and divide us. The image we have of God matters and when in our image of Jesus we see him overcoming what separates humans from God, then we can begin to overcome what separates humans from each other.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

So keep an keen eye out for God this Lent. You may be surprised where you will see him. In fact, if you pay attention you may see him almost everywhere you look.

What if God was one of us,  
Just a slob like one of us,  
Just a stranger on the bus,  
Trying to find his way home.

God was one of us. God is one of us. Let that image work with you a bit and I think you'll see that Jesus has indeed shown us the way home.

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<sup>2</sup> Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Second Readings (Acts and the Epistles)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) 258. "What is this *kata sarka* way of knowing? It is a perceiving of others divorced from their destiny as beloved of God, that is, as those for whom Christ died and was raised. It is also a perceiving of Christ divorced from his destiny as the one who died and was raised for all."

<sup>3</sup> Van Harn, 260. "The only basis of all pulpit pleas to 'be reconciled to God' (v. 20) is that in Christ God has already 'reconciled us to himself' (v. 18). Pleading for the former without proclaiming the latter exchanges the enlivening gospel of God for the deadening moralism of a hectoring harangue."