He Gets Us, But Do We Get him?

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On February 19th, 2023

**Scripture:** Matthew 17:1-9

It’s been 6 days since the Superbowl and two very expensive ads that caught a lot of attention in the American Christian community. I saw one of them: it was beautifully put together, sending a message of Jesus’s inclusive love for all those who feel themselves alienated from the church. These are part of a $100M ad campaign bankrolled by the Hobby Lobby CEO and others. The intention is “conversion” targeting the “marketable middle.” The groups who are running these ads have drawn criticism from both ends of the American Christian theological spectrum. But that’s a conversation for another day. [[1]](#footnote-1)

“He Get Us” is an attractive, even seductive way of thinking about Jesus, and I believe the statement is true. Jesus really does get us: our fears and insecurities, our motivations, our deepest desires and longings. That’s understood. The real question is “do we get him?” All through the Gospel, we see that the disciples not getting Jesus. Time and again he has to correct them, he has to teach them what he is all about. And, it’s not too much of a leap to see that the disciples stand for us and our failure to get him too.

The disciples continually get Jesus wrong, just like we – today – have mostly gotten him wrong. Our temptation has always been to put Jesus in a box, so to speak. This has hemmed in the church throughout history. Christian communities have spent vast sums of money on building churches, cathedrals and monuments in an attempt to make a box for Jesus. Forgetting that he is to be found on the outside, with the people who are excluded by the church, or by their own fears of alienation.

Thank heavens that the Holy Spirit has still found amazing ways to work in and through the church, despite our desperate attempts to contain Jesus. Always we need to come back and ask again, what are you all about, Jesus? And resist the temptation to put Christ in a box.

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Our text for this morning tells of Jesus climbing up a high mountain with his inner circle of disciples: Peter, James and John. Jesus is “transfigured” before their eyes. The sun shines from his face, his clothes glow brilliantly white. He is luminous. Then the disciples see Jesus speaking with the apparitions of the highly revered prophets: Moses and Elijah.

Peter, perhaps he closest disciple, and also the one who most often speaks out of turn, proposes building shelters, dwellings, or memorials for the three prophets. Perhaps he wants to preserve the moment, like a Instagram photo. It’s not enough to be there, experiencing this amazing sight. Peter wants it to last forever.

While he’s still speaking, though, a bright cloud overshadows them and from the cloud a loud voice proclaims “this is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased. LISTEN TO HIM.” Bookends. The same voice was heard at Jesus’ baptism, before this journey through the villages of towns of Galilee began. There is something of a sense of completion in this pronouncement. Something began – about three years ago – and something will soon come to an end.

Jesus had told them, just a week ago – just six whole days before - that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of the elders, chief priests and scribes. Ultimately he will be killed and then he will rise three days later. The disciples resist this message with all their being. They don’t want to hear it, they don’t want to listen to him. But, he goes on “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Now, they are experiencing this glorious moment on the mountain. Peter, James and John are immensely privileged to be a part of it. And, at the same time, they cannot hold onto it. It will pass and they will go down the mountain. They will continue this downhill route to the valley of the shadow of death. In order for Christ’s resurrection to take place his ministry on earth must come to an end. And that end is at the cross. This is an unstoppable progression. The disciples must listen closely, if they are going to “get him” in the way that he “gets them.”

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A little over 18 months ago I visited my parents, seeing my dad in his own home for the last time. He was beginning to fail, but he insisted and continuing to get up and take the short journey from the living room to the dining room for every meal. As he shuffled into the room, his head bent low, he lifted his face slightly and said to me, “I’ve come to realize, nothing is forever.”

It's something that is obviously true, and yet something we do not often acknowledge. Everything on this earth has a beginning and an ending. We have just heard a story in which the disciples have to face this fact. In the midst of the glorious experience, in which they see the divinity and transcendence of Christ, they are also reminded that they cannot hold onto it. They must continue on the road to Jerusalem, where Jesus’ bodily ministry on earth will come to an end.

And so … I have to tell you about another end. After a good deal of soul searching and prayer, I have determined that this – my seventh year of ministry – together with all of you, will be my last. I will retire from parish ministry in June, when we transition from the spring season to the summer.

I made this decision based on my own personal circumstances: a new grandchild in Minnesota, my recently widowed and elderly mom in the UK, and other members of the family coming up on transitional times as well. At the same time, I’ve been thinking these past months “it’s time” for our church.

We all knew that we would not be together forever. And, in my mind, my time here with you all would be no longer than 10 years.

(So, before I go on I’m going to give you a moment, if you have not already heard to absorb the news. And also to invite comment, questions … knowing that there is plenty of time for us all to visit, to talk, to share memories.)

My dear WCC friends, there are things I dearly wish we could have achieved together. And yet, I have to let those things go. And, at the same time, throughout these seven years there have been times when you have all shone. There have been moments when the Holy Spirit has been palpably present in this place. For every person in our gathered congregation – myself included – there have been moments when we have not been our best selves. And there have also been glorious moments when the divine light has shone in each of you.

We have tried to capture those moments with our cameras. Moments like the baptisms and the confirmations, the blessings and the candles alight full of our prayers. But they do not stay with us that way. In the same way, we try to building a housing or put a box around our memories. Perhaps you were married in this sanctuary, so this space becomes a box to hold that sacred moment. Perhaps you said good bye to departed loved ones, and as painful it might be, this space houses those memories. Christmases, Easters, wonderful musical performances, we want to contain them and to recreate them. And yet we cannot. A holy moment is only holy if is also fleeting.

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And now, of course, we have a few months left together. We will continue to discern the future of the WCC ministry, acknowledging that all things on earth come to an end. If the ministry is to end, it is not failure, it is completion.

Jesus must complete his ministry on earth with the disciples, then he will be killed and rise again on the third day. This will be the time when the disciples need to take on a completely new ministry, in light of the resurrected and ascended Christ. This is a transformation that they could not have imagined, even on that day on the mountain when they saw him filled with light and talking with the revered prophets.

Even as we discern these things, though, we will not cease in our mission to “get Jesus.” And so, through the weeks of Lent, the sermons will be focused on the book “Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way and Presence” by Diana Butler Bass. [[2]](#footnote-2) You will also be invited to a short series of mid-week book study meetings on Zoom.

Peter wanted to contain the glorious moment when Jesus was transfigured before his eyes. This very human tendency has continued through the history of the church. And yet, there have been those Christians who have called us to Free Jesus, even to free the risen Christ, so that Christ’s ministry here on earth can be all that God intends.

We close with a verse from the Christmas hymn, In the Bleak Midwinter by Christina Georgina Rossetti:

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain;

Heaven and earth shall flee away when Christ comes to reign.

In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ. [[3]](#footnote-3)

May all God’s people say,

Amen

1. https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/march/he-gets-us-ad-campaign-branding-jesus-church-marketing.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass. *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way and Presence*, New York: Harper Collins, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://hymnary.org/text/in\_the\_bleak\_midwinter [↑](#footnote-ref-3)