

**“Jesus of Nazareth – God-with-us”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

April 3, 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: John 14:15-18

Matthew 28:16-20

“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- Matthew 28:20b

**Prayer**

**God beyond our imagining and yet revealed in Jesus Christ,**

**Awaken, energize, and inspire us with your Living Word.**

**Speak to us again this morning**

**So when we return to our lives outside this time of worship**

**The Gospels may continue to speak through us.**

**In Christ, we pray. Amen.**

“*Crente*,” the Portuguese word for “*believer*” that often carries a negative connotation of gullibility laced with naïveté became my epithet after my baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism was a very serious practice in the small Presbyterian Church I attended. I had to go through a lengthy time of preparation with other catechumens who gathered weekly to learn about the Way of Jesus before I was baptized into the faith of the Church Universal. Soon after my baptism, my excitement about the Jesus of the Gospel stories and commitment to the church somehow began to make everyone in my extended family, especially my college-age cousins, uneasy.

Back then, the youth group was the life force of the congregation. We served as liturgists, preached regularly, taught Sunday school, led Bible studies, sang in the youth choir, planned mission trips, organized service opportunities for the whole church, ran the youth program – surprisingly with very little adult supervision – created a welcoming space for kids from very different backgrounds and, on top of all that, we managed to have fun. As a new member of the church, I was enthralled by the passion the young people in the youth group had for Christ and for communal life. They had this deeply held conviction that we were all networked through baptism into a close-knit family of faith – a new kind of community. There was a lot of curiosity and openness to reflect on Scriptures and rethink the role of the church in the world. Right under the very orthodox nose of our pastor, we were having passionate debates about the difference between “Bible Christians” and Jesus-followers; between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. In our youthful idealism, we thought of our church elders as the Bible-believing members who gave cognitive assent to church doctrines and creeds, but we kept telling each other that we would be different! We would embody the teachings of Jesus. In the late 1980’s, a time when Brazil was emerging from 21 years of military dictatorship, the youth was questioning the hollow political and economic promises of both capitalism

and communism. We were dreaming about a different church and a different world. In our Sunday gatherings, we often wondered out loud how the Church could equip a new generation of Christians to organize our lives in such a way that our Christian attitude might inspire society as a whole to live by the Christian ideal of love of neighbor, where people would treat others as they aspire to be treated. We shared a great deal of disappointment in our parents for accommodating to the established order imposed by the military as well as in the Church for consecrating the status quo rather than questioning it. Until the Church Session finally got wind of our flirtation with rather unconventional ideas about the Way of Jesus and forced the youth group to adhere to the historic tenets of the Church, the youth believed that Christ was beckoning us to a whole new life that was not only biblically faithful and intellectually stimulating, but, above all, authentically Christian. And underpinning our biblical creativity, theological curiosity, and Christian idealism was the kerygma – the very core of the Gospel message – that bothered my family the most. We were convinced that Jesus is worth following not only because of his provocative parables, life-changing teachings, and soul-stirring sermons, but because, in a way that none of us could fully explain, God is present in Jesus' heart, mind, soul, life and being.

My mostly agnostic family did not understand how an intelligent and well-informed teenager could possibly believe that a human being was God's Eternal Word, God's Wisdom and God's Love in human flesh. They had a hard time understanding how I could be a "believer." If we are honest, when we say it out loud, even for those of us who are in worship today, the idea of the incarnation still sounds absurd, far-fetched, objectionable, and asinine. The very first followers of Jesus already had to wrestle with the strangeness of this theological claim at the heart of our faith. Writing to the worldly-wise church of Corinth roughly 20 years after Jesus' death, Paul declared, "**We proclaim Christ... a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**"<sup>1</sup> And the Apostle to the Gentiles did not shy away from affirming the absolutely embarrassing faith that energizes the community of disciples, "**God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb... to bring those who [believe] into the way of salvation.**"<sup>2</sup> At least a decade later, the author of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament put into writing what had become a central and stupendous affirmation of faith among early Christians, "[Jesus] **is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.**"<sup>3</sup>

We will never know for sure if Jesus himself ever claimed to be God incarnate. His original words are forever lost in history. What we do know about Jesus comes from stories and sayings his first friends heard, remembered and kept repeating to each other every time they met to pray, worship, and break bread together. Eventually, 70 to 100 years after Jesus' birth, a few of his faithful followers collected the most memorable stories about what Jesus said, taught and did and assembled them into theological biographies that have become part of the Christian Scriptures. We do not know who the authors of the four Gospels were. These accounts of Jesus' life and ministry remained anonymous until the second century when, guided by the collective wisdom of the

community of the baptized faithful, the earliest Church Fathers appended the names of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John to each one of the Gospels. What is clear is that whoever the four evangelists were, they had no interest in writing an objective history of the life of Jesus. Most of them were Jewish followers of Jesus who would not have called themselves Christians – in fact, the word “*Christian*” appears only three times in the New Testament: twice in Acts<sup>4</sup> and once in 1 Peter.<sup>5</sup> The evangelists’ main drive to preserve the stories about Jesus was to keep their theological understanding of Jesus alive in their own communities. Each one of the Gospel writers had their lives transformed by an encounter with the man from Nazareth and his message. They believed that Jesus, who was crucified by Rome and raised to new life on Easter, was the Wisdom through which the universe was created. The new living Torah that would bring people even closer to God’s Law of love. The new shekinah – the majestic presence of God that had come to dwell among God’s people. The Messiah who was the first fruit of a new creation and had been raised to fulfill Israel’s messianic hopes for the infinitely better world to come. For the earliest followers of Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, they were not in it to found a new religion that, centuries later, would be known as Christianity. They were following Jesus of Nazareth, someone they sensed knew God in an intimate way and seemed adamant in his intention to reform and renew the Jewish faith, practices and institutions of his day. Their Gospels are meant to witness to what theologians call the scandal of particularity, in other words, that the divine became enfleshed in a Jewish body, was born into a Jewish family, grew up practicing the Jewish faith, was shaped by the Jewish Scriptures, lived in the Jewish culture of first century Palestine, died violently on a Roman cross as the king of the Jews and was raised to offer his followers a Way to God and, more importantly, to make a Way for God to be near us all.

As the synagogue and the community of Jesus-followers began to drift apart, the nascent church embraced this scandal of particularity as our own. The early Christians spoke unapologetically about how they experienced God’s holy presence, God’s salvific grace, God’s reckless love, God’s redemptive power, God’s wisdom and God’s liberating truth in that passionate Jewish idealist from Nazareth named Jesus. British theologian N.T. Wright noted that to say that God could become human like one of us is in itself a startling proposition, but to imagine that the real God, the one true God, might come into human history and look like Jesus, that is an astounding and daring theological suggestion. Especially if we consider that the Jesus of the Gospels is not a droopy, self-effacing, timid, pious and boring peripatetic rabbi, but a shrewd Palestinian villager who drank wine with his friends, hung out with folk whose lifestyle would make good church people shudder with horror, agonized over the plight of his own people, taught strange stories and pungent aphorisms and was executed by the state. As implausible as this idea of God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth may be, N.T. Wright reminds us that the Christian understanding of the incarnation was never intended to elevate a human being to some larger-than-life divine status.<sup>6</sup> The revelation of God in Christ is about a very different kind of God. It’s about a God who wants to be known as “*Emmanuel*” – God-with-us. In the life of Jesus, God reaches out to humankind in a divine effort to be relevant to our lives here and now rather than in some distant

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heavenly place. This is the Living God who gives up power and glory and comes into human history as a poor homeless, powerless Jew to stand in solidarity with humankind, to befriend us, to invite us into a relationship that can make us discover an even greater power in compassion, forgiveness and love. The God revealed through Jesus is the God who chooses to serve instead of being adored and served. It is the God that chooses mercy over sacrifice. Jesus reveals the God that counters the conventional wisdom of the world with a self-giving that turns us into believers in the possibility of a faith community where the poor are blessed, the sick are cared for, where trans youth find shelter against hate, truth is spoken to power, weapons are replaced with tools that make life flourish, generosity eclipses indifference, where the grieving are comforted, peacemakers are celebrated as role model for all humanity, where vulnerable people have their thirst for justice slaked, outsiders are welcome, where debts are forgiven and no one lives without their daily bread. For almost two millennia, the Church has held on to this preposterous message that Jesus of Nazareth was the walking, talking, very much alive, very much human embodiment of God's love for humankind and, to be a Christian is to believe in the truth of this message. To journey with Jesus, we have to give ourselves to this sacred story, which, against human reason, insists that if we want to know the transcendent God, the Ultimate Reality in the universe, who loves us completely, we have to take the mystery of the incarnation and of the resurrection of Jesus seriously.

Greg Garrett, a theology professor at Baylor University, confessed that as a follower of Christ, he is not sure if those miraculous events in the life of Jesus – the incarnation and resurrection – did really happen the way the evangelists tell us in their Gospels. Still, Garrett decided to leave his mind open and let people know that his faith in God does not depend on the historical truth, but the story truth. Garrett said, “[The Christian story] ***is the story I am choosing to believe because it helps me make sense of the world – and of the God I believe created it. I believe the message of the story is more important than whether it can be verified.***”<sup>7</sup>

Garrett's decision to keep his mind open to the story despite his qualms about it is not too different from the experience of the first disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. After the resurrection, the Risen Christ arranged a gathering with his friends on a mountain in Galilee. The eleven rushed back home from Jerusalem and the evangelist says that when they came face-to-face with the resurrected Jesus, “***They worshipped him; but some doubted.***” And here is another relevant “but”... *but* this is not how the original Greek describes what took place. The text literally states that the disciples worshipped the Risen Christ and “***they all doubted.***” I am still grateful for the first time I was able to read this passage in Greek. It was encouraging to know that the very first Jesus-followers who experienced God's presence in Jesus first-hand also had doubts and questions like the rest of us. And yet, somehow, they chose to believe in the truth of the story. They kept their hearts and minds open to the Gospel message because the Living Jesus of the story transformed their lives in ways they could have never imagined to be possible. Like you and me, the first followers of Jesus knew that they would not be able to prove whether the incarnation or the resurrection ever happened. In fact, the

disciples realized very quickly that the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is God-with-us is not meant to be historically verified independently from the lives of Christians because this story only becomes true and real in the way the people who have faith, you and I, live.

To journey with Christ is to be fully committed to the truth of the story even when our faith waivers and falters because we too have decided to keep our hearts and minds open to the mystery of God in Christ. We believe because we can still experience the presence of the Living Christ who promised that he would be with us until the end.

William Willimon, the professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry at Duke Divinity School, pointed out that the only way we know the first disciples believed in the truth of the story is by looking at the evidence they left behind. Those same defeated, depressed and scared disciples who scattered back to their homes after the crucifixion, shaking like frightened rabbits behind locked doors, shortly thereafter launched an all-out assault upon Caesar's empire with their preaching and teaching, completely overtaking Caesar's vast legions without drawing a sword or engaging in a single battle. All this happened because the disciples believed and worshipped and followed the Way of Jesus in spite of their doubts. Our chief proof of the continued presence of Jesus Christ with us is the continued presence of followers of Christ in the church; Christians who are choosing to believe in the truth of the story and are gathering to worship even when it is difficult not to doubt. We believe that God is still able to produce a new people, "by water and the Spirit," in other words, through baptism, who confound the ways of the world, a people whose convening is so against the wisdom of the world that there's no way to explain their existence other than, God has revealed God's love in Jesus and promised to be with the doubtful and yet faithful disciples to the end of the ages.<sup>8</sup>

Friends, the message of the Gospels is still alive. The revelation of God in Jesus is still a central claim of our faith. To journey with Jesus, we cannot get around the stories we inherited from the evangelists. To be a Christian, we have to keep our minds open to the truth of the story and dare to worship the God revealed in Jesus with all our strength, heart and soul. Unfortunately, the truth of the story is not something a preacher can make believable in a single sermon. You cannot experience the truth of this story by reading a book about Jesus or by memorizing the historic creeds of the Church. No, friends, the truth of the story has to be excavated from a lived experience of faith, from a heart that believes that Jesus is God-with-us, from disciples who live what they believe.

I used to get upset when my cousins called me "*crente*," "*the Believer*." They were right though. I am a believer! I believe that God's power, wisdom, love became flesh in Jesus Christ. I do not know how and have no interest in proving the historical truth of my faith, I simply believe that Jesus is God-with-us because of what I have experienced in his presence and alongside other faithful and, sometimes doubtful, believers like us. As we journey with Jesus, I pray that today you may also, if you have

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not done it already, make a decision to keep your mind open to the truth of the Gospels. Jesus promised that he would not leave us orphaned but would send the Spirit of Truth to be with us. I hope that today you will make space for the Spirit of Truth in your life and will feel the presence of God with you. No matter where you are on your faith journey, may you know and feel it in your bones that the God revealed in Jesus is with you and will never leave you orphaned. Not even in the moments you doubt the story.

Thanks be to God for our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:23-24 [NRSV].

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:21 [The Message].

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 1:3a [NRSV].

<sup>4</sup> Acts 11:26 & 26:28.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 4:16.

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright in Who Was Jesus?, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Garrett in The Other Jesus: Rejecting a Religion of Fear for the God of Love, p. 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Willimon in Why Jesus?, p. 130-131. [adapted]