

On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "He is the Christ." Still others asked, "How can the Christ come from Galilee?" ⁴² Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" ⁴³ Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. (John 7:40-43)

Jesus Divides People

"That book!" A long time ago, I heard a young soldier say those words with disgust in his voice. We were sitting with some other soldiers and the conversation had turned to religion. I must have made some comment about Jesus and the Bible. That's when he said, "That book!" He meant the Bible. Today, twenty plus years later, you still hear people make the same point. I suspect we'll hear that point over and over again. What is the point? That book is the source of thousands of years of bloodshed and religious wars. That book is responsible for untold millions of deaths. That book divides people. And, of course, the implicit message is, we'd all be a lot better off if religious people would just keep their opinions about that book to themselves. This morning, we have four verses from the book of John that seem to back up that point. We see people divided over a theological argument. But it's not "that book" which divides people. **Jesus divides people.**

I.

Now, maybe you'd like to hear something a little more hopeful, something a little more inspiring, on the first Sunday of the new year. But this year and every year we need to understand the effect Jesus has on people. In this sinful world **Jesus divides people because there's always a good reason not to believe.**

Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. For Jewish people, this is a joyous holiday. Jewish families build shelters and live in them for a week. In the Old Testament, this was one of the three pilgrim feasts. That meant that every Jewish male was supposed to go to Jerusalem to celebrate it. Jesus went, but in secret. Everyone was looking for him and talking about him but he waited until the last and greatest day of the feast to appear publicly. Of course, his enemies attacked his teaching and he got into a debate with them about who he was and what he came to do. Of course, he made his enemies look foolish again. Of course, he made a gospel promise. On this occasion, he promised that streams of living water would flow to those who believed in him. He was talking about the blessings of faith. He chose to say it that way because every day that week, the people marched in joyful processions to the temple and poured out an offering of water before the altar.

Jesus' words had an effect on the people. Some of them said he was "the Prophet." They were talking about a prophecy from the book of Malachi. God had promised that he would send a prophet ahead of the Messiah to prepare his way. Jesus wasn't the prophet; John the Baptist was. Other people said, "**He is the Christ.**" These people were right on target.

But notice the third response, that of the people who considered themselves to be more knowledgeable about the Scriptures. They asked, "**How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?**" This was not a dumb argument. You may remember the account of the Wise Men coming to Herod looking for Jesus. Herod consulted asked the spiritual leaders of the Jews where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem, in Judea." They went on to quote a prophecy from Micah. They were correct. God had carefully planned the location in which the Savior had to be born. And God had determined his descent as well. A thousand years earlier, God had promised King David that the Savior would come from his family. God's people never forgot these promises.

When Jesus came, he fulfilled those prophecies, right? You all know that he was born in Bethlehem. God arranged for the Roman emperor to conduct a census that sent Mary and Joseph south from Galilee to that little town where King David's family lived before he was king. And you probably remember that Joseph went to Bethlehem because he was of the house and line of David. And so was Mary, his new wife. So Jesus perfectly fulfilled these promises.

So why was there an argument? Because Jesus was known as the prophet from Nazareth – from Galilee. God had sent the family back there. That, too, was in keeping with an Old Testament prophecy. Isaiah wrote

that in Galilee the people walking in darkness would see a great light. It was all there. And if anyone really had wanted to know the truth of Jesus' personal history, they could've learned it. Mary was still alive. Jesus had brothers who certainly knew the family history. Jesus himself could've explained to them if they had bothered to ask him. But they didn't. They settled on this scriptural sounding argument and misused it to deny that Jesus was who he said he was.

In that, there is an important lesson for us. The problem was not with God's Word. It was not with Jesus and his personal history. The problem was in the hearts of those people who did not accept him. No unbeliever ever wants to believe in Jesus. But they wanted a good reason to deny him. They wanted something that quieted their hearts and minds, because the gospel that Jesus proclaimed pricked their hearts. The gospel is the power of God and no one who hears it is ever left unchanged. They needed something to justify their rejection. They needed a good solid argument that would allow them to be at peace with their unbelief.

That is still true today. Some people cite "that book" and the blood-stained history of religious warfare and intolerance. Some people cite science and the strata that you can see if you visit the Grand Canyon and the light of stars millions of light years away which has had enough time to reach us and the dinosaur fossils that you can see in any natural history museum. Some people point out the many incidents in the Bible which are not recorded in secular history and the handful of times where secular writers and the Bible disagree about the facts. Some people point to modern psychology and argue that society no longer needs the kind of superstition they claim the Bible promotes.

All these arguments – and thousands more – come from people who don't believe. And in many cases, they're intelligent, thoughtful people. In fact, some of these arguments come from the smartest people you'll ever know. So, many of the arguments are difficult for ordinary Christians to answer. They trouble our faith. They cause us to question what we believe because they're good arguments from a logical stand point. But there will always be good, logical arguments not to believe in Christ as your Savior when you live in a world that's full of the darkness of sin.

All those arguments are really just justifications for unbelief. The gospel is the power of God. The gospel always changes hearts – even the hearts of those who reject it. When someone hears the promise of life and forgiveness in Jesus Christ and then rejects that promise, they harden their hearts. They deafen their ears. Then they need an excuse to justify that rejection. Smart people come up with good arguments to assure themselves that they made the only logical choice.

But they are wrong. Faith is being certain of truths that we cannot see. It's trusting God when he tells us things that this world cannot understand – things which our own sinful hearts could never accept. The truth is, not one of us is able to decide to believe. Left to ourselves, we'd be no different from the unbelievers all around us who come up with all those clever arguments to deny Jesus. But we were not left to ourselves. The gospel is the power of God and it does always change hearts. The Holy Spirit entered our hearts through the word and the sacraments and he gave us faith. By a miracle of God's grace, he's conquered the unbelief that we were born with and he made us believers. That miracle transcends all good arguments. It overcomes all sinful, human logic and observation. It changes us from children of the devil into children of God.

II.

But we still live in this world of sin and darkness. Knowing Jesus is our greatest joy. But being believers in a sinful world means that we will live our entire lives in conflict with those who don't believe. We can't avoid that. In fact, if we're not in conflict with their arguments, we're not taking our faith seriously. The Bible is clear on this point. This truth causes us a lot of stress and spiritual anxiety. But until the Lord returns, it has to be this way. **Jesus divides people because faith and unbelief cannot agree.**

Unbelievers in our society like to invoke Jesus. Liberals use him to demand that we embrace everyone, "because Jesus did" they say. So how can we call homosexuality a sin or ever discipline someone because they've violated our idea of morality? Mormons and some right wing Christians use Jesus to trumpet family values as if that were the end all and be all of the faith. And in all these efforts, the real Christ is ignored.

Who is the real Jesus? He is the Son of God. He is the Word who was with the Father in the beginning. He created the universe and he still sustains it and rules it. And he is the Son of Mary, a real human being, who came into this world to take our place in life and in death. He was made like us in every way, except he had no sin. And he died to pay for our sins and he rose from the dead so that we can have eternal life. He is the promised Christ, the Savior of the world. In him alone, all people have life.

That is Jesus the world needs. You and I need him because our hearts aren't perfect either. When we hear all those logical arguments, sometimes we tremble in our faith. When we see the blood-stained history of religious warfare and intolerance, when we live the conflict in our families, because we have relatives that are offended that they can't commune in our church, because people we love think we take this stuff way too seriously, because we have people pulling at us, trying to get us to stay out late on Saturday or play hockey or work on Sundays instead of hearing the word – when all those things attack us, sometimes, we put God in second place behind those people and events. Or if we do put God first, we do it resentfully. We do it because we have to, and not because we love our Lord. We sin even when our bodies are doing the things that God calls us to do because these sinful hearts don't want to.

All that sin deserves hell. But Jesus died and he rose to erase our guilt. He comes to us again and again in the gospel and he forgives today's failures. He forgives us for all the times that we put the world around us first. He forgives us for all the times that our faith was too weak to cling to the truth in the face of logical arguments. He forgives us for still having sin in our hearts.

Every time we hear that message of forgiveness, Jesus strengthens our weak faith. He fortifies us to live for him. The Bible calls living for him warfare. St. Paul told us to fight the good fight. Living as a Christian here is not strolling in the park. It's a battle. We're fighting for our lives against an enemy that's stronger and smarter than we are. We're outnumbered and out-thought by the crushing horde of unbelievers and their logical, scientific and emotional arguments. We cannot coexist with them. We cannot find a middle ground and compromise with them. This is war! And losing means spending eternity in hell.

But we are not alone in the war. We have Jesus. He died and he rose for us. And he is ruling all things for the good of the Church. That means us. St. Paul tells us that if the Father invested his Son in us to give us life, won't he also give us all things? We have God the Father on our side. And we have the Holy Spirit fighting for us. He wages his war in our hearts. Every time we hear the gospel, the Spirit is fighting for us. Every time we confess our sins and our pastor announces that we're forgiven, the Spirit is fighting for our hearts. Every time we come to communion, every time we bring a child to be baptized, every time we remember that we were baptized and in that water God washed away our sins and made us his, every single time, the Holy Spirit is trampling the unbelief that lives in our hearts and demolishing the arguments and pretensions of unbelievers the world over. He defies the logic and science and wisdom of men. And he keeps our faith alive and healthy and strong.

Because we are Christians, we have to fight. But only for as long as this unbelieving world lasts. When we die, we will have peace. We will have unity. When Jesus returns, that peace and unity will take over this world. Jesus will drive out the devil and all unbelievers and enemies of the gospel. All believers of every time and place will be one with Christ. We will all be one in the faith. And our faith will be perfect. And we will live together with Jesus forever. Amen.