

## Son of God

TEXT: 1 John 4:7-12

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on December 18, 2022*

One of the biggest obstacles for Christians reading the Bible is trying to read it without the 2,000 years of interpretation that have been layered over its words. Some of that interpretation is relatively recent, but a lot of it goes back to the early councils of the church in the fourth and early fifth centuries. The very first Council of actual Christians, as opposed to the early followers of Jesus who still constituted a branch of Judaism, happened in the year 325 in the Greek city of Nicaea, which sits in modern-day Turkey.

The Council of Nicaea was called by the Roman emperor Constantine, who had just converted to Christianity, and he had an agenda. He ordered the Council to decide what it meant to say that Jesus was the “Son of God.” Further, he hoped their answer would turn an eastern theologian named Arius into a heretic. No pressure, of course.

So, much like with Rome and the Sanhedrin that we saw last week, the deliberating body had some latitude, but they also knew it was unwise to cross the wishes of their benefactor and protector in Rome. But they also knew they were the bishops and priests of a very new religion, and some important things did need to be sorted out.

The thing that made fourth-century Christians distinct from the Judaism of Jesus’ first-century followers was the belief that Jesus was more than just a man, even more than just a prophet. They believed that somehow, some way, Jesus had a unique relationship to God to the point of being actually divine himself. But what that meant, exactly, was a matter of hot debate.

When Jews used the phrase “Son of God,” which occurs in both the Old and New Testaments, they meant a human being who was exceptionally holy and wise—that God’s nature could be seen in the person’s words and deeds to such an extent that it was like being able to see the parent in the child. It was a more formal way of saying, “He’s a chip off the old block,” with the “old block” here being God.

For Jews, even during Jesus lifetime, “Son of God” didn’t mean any kind of divine being, just a good and supremely righteous man. But when **we** read the phrase “Son of God” in our Bibles, even when we read it in the Old Testament, that distinction rarely occurs to us. We read instead with the meaning given to us by the fourth-century Council of Nicaea. And what did they decide? We actually sang it this morning in the second verse of O Come, All Ye Faithful: “True God of true God, Light from Light Eternal, lo, he shuns not the Virgin’s womb; Son of the Father, begotten not created.” That language is straight out of the Nicene Creed, produced by that first council in the year 325. It’s the second line of the creed.

Here are the first two lines: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.” Perfectly clear, right?

The Nicene Creed served to condemn poor Arius as a heretic, and it became the foundation for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which was the most important development from the council. But in trying to take down Arius, the creed resorted to language about only-begotten sons that has sown confusion about the Christian message ever since. And every subsequent Council made things worse.

By the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 we get a Jesus who, according to the creed produced by that Council, “was born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two

persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.” I mean, if Jesus were still in his grave, he’d be rolling over. “Inconfusedly” indeed.

Politics and heretic hunting aside, I believe that even the understandable desire to sort it all out—to create some kind of rational definition to explain how Jesus could be fully human and fully God at the same time—was itself a fool’s errand.

The divinity of Jesus is something we take on faith or we don’t. It’s not a claim that the Bible makes, unless you impose the later proclamations of the councils on its words. And to think that a council of even the smartest people can get together and lay out the anatomy of God like biology students who have just done their first dissection is, to me, pure arrogance.

In both the Old and the New Testaments, we are shown a God who is willing to be known, understood, and even loved by human beings; but whose nature is so vastly different and greater than human beings that such knowledge can only ever be partial. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13 that we see things as if behind a dark and dirty glass. We know only in part; we understand only in part. Our fulness of understanding of the ways and nature of God will come, but not while we still inhabit mortal flesh.

I’m not denying the divinity of Jesus. I’m just saying that, like the very existence of the God we believe dwells in him, it’s a matter of faith, not knowledge. We can’t prove it—not by the Bible and not by theological argument. The Bible is not given to us as a proof text for certain interpretations of its stories. It is a collection of religious texts that have shaped Christian belief and practice over thousands of years. But it shapes us through stories—through asking us what we think and believe after hearing what the characters in its pages encountered, believed, and did in response.

Across the millennia since, even different branches of Christianity have built those interpretations differently. It has only been when the Christian faith has been wielded by politicians and empires that some interpretations have been suppressed and persecuted. Jesus never, ever uses coercion to force a person to believe in a certain way, even when doing so might have saved him from a brutal execution.

When Jesus was hauled in front of the Sanhedrin for trial, they asked him if he was the Son of God. He didn’t answer, “Well, it depends what you mean by that.” He didn’t say, “Why yes, I’m consubstantial with the Father. Inconfusedly!” He didn’t say, “Absolutely not, that would be blasphemy!” He replied, “You say that I am.”

Jesus specifically, and the Bible more generally, is frustrating like that. When the Pharisees and Sadducees come to him with questions, he answers them with questions of his own. When a Pharisee comes to ask Jesus what he must do to be saved in Luke 10, Jesus says in essence, “You’re a scholar of the law, what do you think?”

Whatever it actually means to be the Son of Man or the Son of David or the Son of God, Jesus does not waste the precious days of his life arguing about it. When pressed, he admits to a unique calling from God; and, to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, he even admits to being the Messiah that was expected. But the Messiah expected by the Jews and Samaritans alike was not a divine figure. They were expecting a mortal human with an exceptional calling; someone like Moses, who would lead Israel out of the desert of oppression to a promised land of freedom. Someone who would provide justice for an abused people.

It’s worth noting here that just as Constantine convened the Councils to establish and explain the divinity of Jesus and related doctrines, it was also Constantine who decided that the Church should start celebrating Christmas. Despite the miracles of stars, angels, and a virgin birth described in Matthew and Luke, the Church didn’t celebrate Christmas early on. The big festivals were Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost.

But once Constantine converted to Christianity and made it not just his personal religion but the religion of the whole Roman empire, he started the project of wiping out paganism across the land. That consisted, in part, of forced conversions and persecution, but it also involved reinterpreting pagan festivals to give them a new, Christian meaning.

The pagan festival of Saturnalia occurred on December 25. It marked the winter solstice and celebrated the birth of the sun god, as the days started getting longer again. Constantine didn't see any danger to his power in changing the empire's religion. But taking away a major festival in the dark of winter; that was another matter. So, he just changed the festival from the celebration of the birth of the sun god to the celebration of the birth of God's son, Jesus. The church celebrated its first Christmas on December 25, in the year 336.

Of course blending a Christian holy day with a raucous pagan festival led to almost as many issues as forcing church leaders to draft a theology of Jesus' divinity based on the need to condemn a particular man as a heretic. By the time we got to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some Christian groups, like the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, were so scandalized by the holiday's revelry and excess that on May 11, 1659 the celebration of Christmas was banned in Boston, fining anyone who was caught celebrating.

That ban remained in place for 22 years before new European immigrants demanded its return. But it was still not a formal holiday for another couple of centuries. Louisiana was the first state to declare Christmas a holiday in 1830. In 1856, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "We are in a transition state about Christmas here in New England. The old Puritan feeling prevents it from being a cheerful hearty holiday; though every year makes it more so." Christmas has been a national holiday in the United States only since 1870, ordered by President Ulysses S. Grant. And today, the celebration of Christmas is essential—not to our souls or even to our character, but to our nation's economy.

It's that jumble of history and tradition that will play out across this coming week as the church will fill up for Christmas Eve services, but next Sunday, on Christmas Day itself—well, let's just say it's a good thing we don't need a quorum to hold church services.

All of that background about the machinations of the early councils, the questions about what Son of God really means, and the messy relationship with Christmas as a holiday may feel like I've taken the magic out of Christmas. But, honestly, my job is not to make Christmas magical but to make it meaningful.

Jesus may not have been born on December 25, but he was definitely born. As I said a couple of weeks ago, scholars of all stripes agree on that much. And while we can't prove that Jesus was divine; neither can we prove that he wasn't. Christianity is not meant to be magical; but it is, by the questions it invites us to consider, mystical. When we delve into the center of our faith, we find ourselves at the heart of mystery.

Away on a retreat about 20 years ago, I met a retired dentist who told me about his faith journey from atheism to Buddhism, and his fairly recent conversion to Christianity. He told me, "I could never have become a Christian if I hadn't been a Buddhist first. Buddhism taught me how to live with paradox."

If we are to mature as Christians, at some point we have to let go of the magic and embrace the mystery. We need to stop looking for God only in the temple and check out the barn. Christmas invites us to look up from the books that give us knowledge, and allow the stars, the music, and the miracle of a baby's birth—any baby's birth—to transport us to wonder.

Christmas joins Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost as a Christian festival that centers mystery and questions over proof and certainty. We can walk up to the stable, look at the baby in the manger and scream at him, "Who are you, really?!" and all you'll get is a twinkle in a baby's eyes that reflects your question back at your own heart. Jesus as an adult would be no different, asking his disciples even as he now asks of us, "Who do you say that I am?" Amen.