

*“They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (John 6:42).*

Surely by now, you grumbling religious leaders know who Jesus is. He’s the Son of God. Haven’t you been listening? Haven’t you seen what he’s done? Surely that wedding at Cana where he turned 180 gallons of water into the finest wine must have convinced someone. Missed the Cana gig? Well, certainly you religious experts saw how Jesus healed the paralytic on the steps of the Temple in Jerusalem. You groused enough about it; Something about it being unlawful to heal on the Sabbath. Really guys? What about the stilling of the storm? Or the feeding of the 5,000? Haven’t you figured out who Jesus is yet? Maybe you should have been with me back in second grade when the most incredible Sunday School teacher ever, Mrs. Barnes, told us what it meant that God put on our flesh in Jesus; That God took his love for us to a whole new level in becoming one of us. You quote chapter and verse of scripture looking for God and can’t see that God is already here and has found you. Jesus is God’s Word spoken at Creation made flesh; God’s Word of prophetic faithfulness made flesh; God’s Word of healing made flesh. And still you can’t see beyond appearances?

Truth be told, I too have a hard time seeing beyond appearances. I’m ordained. I’ve been to seminary, studied Greek, learned how to dissect Scripture and put it back together again, all the while learning how to teach and preach this stuff. But when push comes to shove, I have doubts. I have times when my holy imagination has run dry. We clergy stake our entire lives on gospel proclamation and still we see churches dying before our very eyes; haunted hulks of once vibrant church buildings, now shabby specters of bygone glory. We see dwindling numbers of people in church and the fear that evokes, experiencing that fear first hand in personal attacks and in some instances, firings. We see what the church could be and still feel the shackles of congregational anxiety holding us back from adapting to the culture’s needs around us. We see budgets shrink and programs go unfunded and still have to explain why folks aren’t beating down the doors of our churches on a Sunday morning. By all appearances, God at times seems absent. Little wonder that so many clergy are lonesome, weary, depressed, and end up leaving the ministry after just a few short years.

But here’s the deal, God has never been stopped by appearances. Our mainline Protestant churches may, like Lazarus, have the stench of death in their garments, appearing to be dead, but when the Word made flesh utters the words “come out”,

death's defeat has begun. Old ways of being the church may be dead or dying and our congregations may seem lifeless, but when Jesus issues that same "Lazarus call" to us, new life has begun and the church is literally pregnant with possibility.

"Come out!" Jesus' words to Lazarus and to us. Come out! In the face of decline, come out! Unwrap the grave clothes. Breathe deep and step into the light. Come out and be the church – be the Beloved Community God has called you to be; doing justice and loving mercy; not ecclesiastical entrepreneurs but God's holy fools proclaiming life and hope in the midst of death and despair. Be the Beloved Community God has called you to be in the waters of Baptism; no longer fearing appearances of scarcity but trusting the promises of God's abundance; trusting that God is not yet done with us and won't be for a very long time. Come out. Dear friends in Christ, come out!

Peace and Love,

Pastor Doug