

**PULLING BACK THE VEIL  
REVELATION 7:9-17; JOHN 10:22-30  
APRIL 29, 2007—EASTER FOUR  
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“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly,” so the religious leaders demanded of Jesus. They sound a bit annoyed, don’t they? “Don’t beat around the bush, Jesus, don’t speak in figures of speech just tell us if you are the Messiah!

And these were the leaders. The ones who were supposed to recognize the Messiah. The experts. The keepers of the tradition. In fact, given their annoyance, scholars suspect they were beyond wanting to know if Jesus was the Messiah. Now they’re looking for ways to trap him with charges of treason or blasphemy.

It is significant this interrogation takes place on the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah—one of those poignant little details John, master story teller and literary genius, throws in to make the episode resonate.

Hanukkah celebrates the liberation of Jerusalem from the Syrian king, Antiochus Ephiphanes who defiled the Temple by building an altar to his own gods. Judas Maccabeus and his brothers regained control of the Temple in an uprising and rededicated it to the God of Israel.

This interrogation of Jesus about the core hope of the Jewish community—the Messiah—on the day the nation’s spiritual identity was restored has a touch of irony. It might be like some good upstanding citizens at a July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration denouncing Martin Luther King, Jr. as a trouble maker.

For you and me, for the reader of the story, we see the irony. We see the spiritual blindness of the religious leaders. And John’s genius is to get us to look in the mirror, to ask if we are spiritually blind in our time. Is the Risen Christ, the Messiah of God in our midst and are we blind to it?

I’d like to talk with you today about this business of recognizing Jesus—especially in this season of Easter when, the bible says, he comes to us in unexpected places and ways.

The very question “are you the Messiah?” places the responsibility for recognizing the Messiah on the Messiah and not the ones the Messiah comes to heal and teach and save.

But Jesus has been with them for most of his ministry; performed miraculous works and amazing deeds, said on any number of occasions his agenda and God’s agenda were the same. What more did they need?

We saw Al Gore Friday night. He had an interesting statistic. He said 53% of the population had their doubts about global warming.

Yet we have been recording historic CO2 emissions for the past forty years; watching glaciers in every polar zone recede and disappear; counting endangered or extinct plant and animal species and we’re still not sure about global warming.

Whose responsibility is it? The scientists, the politicians, the executives? Do you and I have a responsibility to respond to what we see and hear and learn about the climate crisis?<sup>[i]</sup>

“Just tell us Jesus if you are the Messiah and everything will be alright.” But everything won’t be alright. Because if Jesus is the Messiah then they would have to make some dramatic changes.

They’d have to give up those reigns of power and reorient themselves to him. They’d have to humble themselves and begin to live the kind of life he was preaching. They’d have to pay attention to the poor, the orphan and the widow and restructure their entire spiritual-industrial complex.

No if this Jesus of Nazareth were the Messiah then everything would not be alright. The world would get turned upside down and these religious authorities and leaders would have to redefine themselves.

You see, as long as I can question whether there is a climate crisis then I really don’t have to start unplugging my cell phone charger when it is not in use and turning lights out around the house and doing less laundry and buying biodegradable everything.

As long as I can question if there is really a climate crisis then I can maintain the status quo. Better if I can discredit people like Al Gore or other whistle blowers then I won’t even have to ask that annoying question—are we in a climate crisis?

Don’t give us all those charts and graphs and computer models and scientific words, just tell us if we are in a climate crisis. Well, Al Gore’s response to that request Friday night was to tell us in as many ways as he could, including plain language, that we have a climate crisis.

Jesus did the same. “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.”

But the ones who did believe already reoriented and relocated themselves, they were sheep of another fold. John was writing to Jews who’d left their synagogues for upper rooms where the new Jesus movement was meeting. Jesus’ teachings were a priority in their lives; they sought to enact the greatest commandment—to love one another—in ways that earned them persecution and strife.

They congregated in secret and would soon flee to the catacombs in Rome; they met by candle light; when caught they were martyred; yet, they thrived under these harsh conditions as a community because they placed him at the center of their life together.

Not only did they not question who he was or what he said, they trusted him and recognized his voice when he spoke to them through the suffering of the poor and outcast. Feed my sheep. They’d embraced the responsibilities of a new life.

Just like those first followers we are called to reorient and relocate ourselves. But sometimes we get caught up in our own spiritual-industrial complexes. In today’s world we want lives that are safe and affliction-free and comfortable.

But such living comes at a high cost. Last week Joshua Bell, one of the greatest violinists in the world took his \$5 million Stradivarius to one of Washington DC’s busiest

Metro stops dressed in jeans, t-shirt and baseball cap, opened his case, and started playing some of the most beautiful music ever composed for violin. 1200 people passed by. One recognized who he was, stopped to listen, threw a twenty dollar bill in the case.

“I couldn’t believe it, here was Joshua Bell playing Bach and Brahms. People were just tossing in pocket change as they raced by. What a bargain! I stepped away from the crowd, against a wall out of the rush hour and just listened. When he was finished, I found the biggest bill I had in my wallet and put it in his violin case.”

The article in the *Washington Post* last week didn’t say much else about that man. But my hunch is at least on this day he wasn’t just another rat in the rat race as Bill Coffin used to say; he was connected with the world around him and when he recognized great beauty he let it sink into his life, and changed his plans.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Perhaps the point of our slow response to the climate crisis and the commuters who rushed by Joshua Bell is that recognizing anything major—even beautiful music—places demands on us, reorients our lives, relocates us. Sometimes the familiar drill of the rat race is easier.

What I’d like to pose for our consideration today, in this Easter season, is that the veil that separates us from God is already pulled back. It happened on Good Friday when, as the Gospel says, the curtain covering the holy of holies at the temple was torn in two.

What that wonderful symbolism from Luke proclaims is that Good Friday changed everything. We can now see behind the veil that used to separate us from God. The God who only met with Moses; the God who led the people by a pillar of fire and a cloud; the God who dwelt high above on the holy mountain.

This mysterious and removed God has revealed himself totally and completely in Jesus on the Cross. Nothing separates us any longer. What does God look like? Look to Jesus. What does God want us to do? See what Jesus does, listen to him, follow him. What more do we need?

On the one hand I believe we want nothing more than to be remade into God’s new people and yet on the other hand we balk and hesitate and analyze and get stuck.

There’s another subway story. Remember Wesley Autry who jumped into the train tracks to cover a man who’d just had a seizure and fell off the platform? Five cars passed overhead. It took a while to extricate the two.

When Ellen DeGeneres asked Autry what was going through his mind when he jumped in front of that speeding train. He said, “I was thinking, ‘Fool, you got to go in there.’” “I like that your mind called yourself a fool,” she said.

But our response to Autry’s deed is perhaps where the real story lies. Donald Trump wrote him a check for \$10,000. He was jetted to the Super Bowl; received cars, vacations, fur coats, expensive meals; honored by Mayor Bloomberg, Eliot Spitzer, Hillary Clinton, was singled out by George Bush at the State of the Union. Captivated Letterman, caused B.B. King to drop to his knees and on and on.<sup>[iii]</sup>

We live in a society where such selfless acts are desperately needed but rarely witnessed. We want to do the right thing. We want to reorient and relocate our lives for a

sustainable planet, to experience the beauty in the earth, to help a fellow human being but something in us says, not now, not today.

Wesley Autry became a vicarious symbol of the action we desperately want to take but hold back from.

Like those religious leaders who were irritated with Jesus, we also get caught up and comfortable in our status quo living.

Among those who interrogated Jesus we know there were some, like many of us, who were open to his message. There's a good chance Nicodemus was even among them. The same Nicodemus who went to Jesus in the night so not to be seen. The same Nicodemus who knew in his heart of hearts that Jesus was the Messiah and eventually let that trust lead him into a new life.

You see I think each of us has a little bit of Nicodemus in us; reluctant hedgers of our bets but finally staking our claim with the itinerant rabbi. I think each of us has a little bit of that subway hero, Wesley Autry in us, too; willing to do the right thing for a fellow human being even at great risk to ourselves. The question is when, like Nicodemus, will we stake our claim with the Son of God; when like Wesley Autry will we take the leap of faith and be a fool for Christ's sake.

Al Gore said Friday night we have everything we need to reverse the climate crisis, if we would simply exercise the will to act.

You could say the same thing about the church—in Jesus Christ we have everything we need to be a great church if we would give ourselves permission to let go and follow him.

The question today's story raises is not to Jesus: "Are you the Messiah?" But to each one of us: "Are we the church of Jesus Christ?" Amen.

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<sup>[i]</sup> These points are made by Gore in his *Inconvenient Truth* movie.

<sup>[ii]</sup> Gene Weingarten "Pearls Before Breakfast," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2007, p W10.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Robert Kolker, *New York Magazine*, April 23, 2007, p 28ff.