

On Christianity
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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14:16

So far in this sermon series, we've covered Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. Today we're focusing on Christianity, a World Religion we should know something about. To get to the heart of Christianity, we'll begin with Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago. Jesus was born to a Jewish family around 4 C.E. and grew up in Nazareth, a hill town of maybe 2,000 people. Jesus and his family were likely part of the laboring class, though he ended up getting baptized by John the Baptist and beginning his public ministry when he was around 30. The hallmarks of Jesus' ministry were—its itinerant and charismatic nature, a focus on fellow Jews in Galilee from the peasant class, prophetic sensibilities, preaching about the Kingdom of God, a concern for the destitute and oppressed, breaking social boundaries, miraculous activities like healings and exorcisms, and symbolic actions.[1]

We must always remember that Jesus was Jewish. As scholar Amy-Jill Levine states, "Jesus of Nazareth dressed like a Jew, prayed like a Jew (and most likely in Aramaic), instructed other Jews on how best to live according to the commandments given by God to Moses, taught like a Jew, argued like a Jew with other Jews, and died like thousands of other Jews on a Roman cross." [2] Now it's quite a leap to go from Jesus of Nazareth to the Christian Church. After his death around 35 C.E., something remarkable happened—the Resurrection. The reason we are sitting in church today is because Jesus rose on a Sunday, every Sunday is considered a Little Easter. In the end, Jesus' followers experienced him as a divine presence and reality after his death.

From a historical perspective, the belief in Jesus' Resurrection resulted in his followers continuing to teach his message, to walk in the Way of love he embodied, proclaim him as the Messiah (the Anointed One), and open up the movement to Gentiles. Peter, Paul, and James, the brother of Jesus, helped shape the early faith. Essentially, what began as a Jewish reform movement among peasants in Galilee spread to Rome and Constantinople and beyond and eventually become a separate religion—Christianity.

It's important to explore some early Church history to see this progression. At first, there was persecution and martyrdom, but the message spread through oral traditions bearing in mind Jesus' instructions, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." [3] Paul's letters of instruction and encouragement were circulating as early as the 50s and the Gospels, which recounted Jesus' life and teachings, were recorded around 70-100. Fast forwarding to 312, Emperor Constantine converted and declared Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. The Nicene Creed was written around 325 to determine which beliefs were correct. Actually, during the Patristic Period (100-600), there were theological litmus tests in the form of Creeds to define Jesus' nature and various Church Councils decided which writings would be included in the Christian canon.[4]

Even as Church leaders attempted to work out theological differences, it was clear that the early diversity of the Jesus Movement was here to stay. In 1054, there was the Great Schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. There was hope that the Schism could be mended until Roman Christians destroyed Constantinople during the Crusades in 1204. In 1517, another separation occurred with Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Once the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity divided, and then the Western branch itself divided, separations happened rapidly.[5]

Like Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, Christianity continues to have various branches. The Eastern Orthodox Church is centered on liturgy, mysticism, and monasticism. The Roman Catholic Church is also centered on liturgy and monasticism, but is more centralized and hierarchical in organization. The Protestant Branch rejected the traditions and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and proclaimed a Bible-based faith and personal piety.[6] Christians still disagree about how to follow Jesus' teachings, how to interpret the Bible and even what books to include, the emphasis placed on tradition versus modern sensibilities, theological understandings of the Trinity, atonement, the sacraments, theodicy, Christology, ecclesiology, etc. and how to structure and govern the Church itself.

So what makes Christianity, while clearly complicated, also unique? A great articulation comes from the poet Christian Wiman, who wrote *My Bright Abyss* as he came to terms with cancer. Wiman couldn't help but reflect on his faith, writing, "I don't know what it means to say that Christ 'died for my sins' (who wants that? who invented that perverse calculus?) but I do understand—or intuit, rather—the notion of God not above or beyond or immune to human suffering, but in the very midst of it, intimately with us in our sorrow, our sense of abandonment, our hellish astonishment at finding ourselves utterly alone, utterly helpless." [7]

We hear this further echoed in the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Christian philosopher whose son died tragically in a mountain climbing accident. Wolterstorff wrote, "God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers . . . Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God." [8] Or in the words of ELCA pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, "God is not distant at the cross. . . . God is there in the messy mascara-streaked middle of it, feeling as [bad] as the rest of us." [9] These theological reflections by modern Christians, the belief that God suffers, a claim we see most clearly when we fix our eyes on the cross, is what makes Christianity unique. The idea that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with Us, especially in the midst of our own suffering, matters. Of all World Religions, Christianity has one of the most personalized and humanized views of Divinity because of our belief that Jesus himself was somehow both human and divine, God incarnate, God with Us.

But Christianity has a shadowy side just like every other religion. Religion Scholar John Hick reflects that Christianity, "has generated savage wars of religion and supported innumerable 'just wars'; has tortured and burned multitudes of heretics and witches in the name of God; has motivated and authorized the persecution of the Jews; has validated systemic racism; and has tolerated the Western capitalist 'rape of the earth.'" [10] The shadowy side of Christianity is quite violent. The issue has often been maintaining that there is only one right way to interpret scripture or think about the sacraments and theology, the Creeds and Church Councils did some damage actually. But if we take a closer look, there's always been diversity of belief and practice. In the Gospels alone, Mark presents Jesus as the Suffering "Son of God," Matthew presents Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, Luke presents Jesus as the Savior of the World, and John presents Jesus as God's Self-Revelation. [11] There's never been just one correct vision of Jesus' life and teachings that the Church adopted, not really.

To summarize where we've been, Jesus of Nazareth was born to a Jewish family around 4 C.E. Jesus got baptized by John the Baptist and began his public ministry when he was around 30. The hallmarks of Jesus' ministry were: its itinerant and charismatic nature, a focus on fellow Jews in Galilee from the peasant class, prophetic sensibilities, preaching about the Kingdom of God, a concern for the destitute and oppressed, breaking social boundaries, miraculous activities like healings and exorcisms, and symbolic actions. After his crucifixion around 35, his followers experienced him as a divine presence and reality. The Resurrection ensured that every Sunday is considered a Little Easter for Christians.

In time, Jesus' followers proclaimed him as the Messiah (the Anointed One) and included Gentiles. The faith grew through oral traditions, Paul's letters in the 50s, and the Gospels

around 70-100. In 312 Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire, and the Nicene Creed followed. In 1054 there was the Great Schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Protestant Reformation began in 1517. These Churches remain the three branches of Christianity.

What makes Christianity so unique is the Incarnation, the theological concept that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with Us. The belief that God suffers, which we see most clearly on the cross, continues to sustain Christians. Like all religions though, Christianity has a shadowy side, including participating in or authorizing wars of religion, persecuting perceived heretics and the Jewish people, validating racism, and tolerating the destruction of the environment. Yet if we take a closer look, particularly at the Gospels, we observe that Christianity has always embodied a diversity of beliefs and practices as Christians strive to walk in the Way of Jesus. And that, my friends, is Christianity. Amen.

[1] Dr. Benjamin Valentine, Systematic Theology II, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008; Marcus J. Borg, Evolution of the Word: The New Testament in the Order the Books Were Written, 17.

[2] Amy-Jill Levine, The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus, 51.

[3] Matthew 28:19, NRSV.

[4] Dr. Benjamin Valentine, Systematic Theology II, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008.

[5] Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, Introduction to Religious Studies Class Notes, Elon University, Fall 2004.

[6] Moojan Momen, The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach, 12-14.

[7] Christian Wiman, My Bright Abyss, 134

[8] Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son, 81.

[9] Nadia Bolz-Weber, as quoted by Michelle Boorstein, "Bolz-Weber's liberal, foulmouthed articulation of Christianity speaks to fed-up believers" in The Washington Post, November 3, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/bolz-webers-liberal-foulmouthed-articulation-of-christianity-speaks-to-fed-up-believers/2013/11/03/7139dc24-3cd3-11e3-a94f-b58017bfee6c_story.html?hpid=z4

[10] John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, Eds. The Myth of X Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religion, 29-30.

[11] Dr. Benjamin Valentine, Systematic Theology II, Andover Newton Theological School, Spring 2008.