

A Humanist Sermon on the Mount for 2022

Beacon UU Congregation

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Every year around Christmas and Easter, I embark on a sermonator's quest to ferret out what's trending in our popular culture about Jesus. I'm often late to the party on what I find, yet always fascinated by how this renowned figure continues to mystify and captivate us. This year, I discovered three Magi-worthy treasures.

Perhaps you've heard of the wildly popular TV series called "The Chosen." I first encountered it in an article in *The Atlantic* magazine, and followed up by a dive into the twitter hashtag *#bingejesus*. It was launched with \$10 million in crowdfunding, has its own app, and is independently produced by something called Angel Studios. The series streams for free on Youtube and elsewhere, and can also be accessed on Netflix. As I clicked play, a disclaimer screen appeared. It reads: "The Chosen is based on true stories of the gospels of Jesus Christ. Timelines and locations have been combined and condensed. Backstories and some characters and dialogue has been added. However, all biblical and historical context and any artistic imagination are designed to support the truth and intention of the Scriptures. Viewers are encouraged to read the Gospels."

At first, I was amused – backstories, additional characters, modern jargon, and an apostle on the autism spectrum. What is this – The White Lotus, Yellowstone, The Big Bang Theory? Yet, on further reflection, the strategy makes sense, because to stretch the series to three seasons (so far) from the actual Jesus narrative would absolutely require the producers to embellish with backstories and additional characters, given how little scholars have been able to verify about Jesus' life, his three year ministry and his death at age 33. Regarding the reference to the "truth and intentions of the Scriptures." Well, that's another kettle of loaves and fishes all together.

As some of you know, I was raised in a Jewish home. It was taboo to talk about Jesus or even show curiosity about him. We knew he was a Jew (check mark in our column) but that he was not considered our Messiah. We had it drilled into us that Christians had persecuted and killed us for millennia, all in his name. Reading the New Testament? Why would we? Not our story. Not our guy. It would be subversive. We'll stick with Moses, Solomon, and throw in Esther for good measure.

Then, I married a Catholic and went to Mass with his family. Oy vey. What a foreign experience and the crucifix over the chancel bewildered and even, frightened me. Who is this man tortured on a cross? When I became a Unitarian Universalist, I met a different Jesus – the humanitarian Jesus...not Christ, not a God who allegedly died for my sins. Just Jesus.

If you are new to this uncommon denomination, here's a bullet train recap – we are descended from devout Puritans and Calvinists. Our two historical branches were progressively liberal Protestant denominations. Unitarians parted company with the Congregationalists in the 1830s over two issues – The Trinity (we believed God was a unified and benevolent whole) and whether Jesus was God or man. We leaned into the teachings and examples of the human Jesus and away from the doctrines about his divinity, led by famed Unitarian rabble rousers like the Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Universalists experienced their breach with Free Baptists over the question of whether salvation was available to all. They said, “Yes.”

In 1995, I entered Harvard Divinity School, originally founded to train Unitarian ministers, like Emerson, in fact. This was the first time I cracked open the New Testament, at age 38. Yes, I felt a bit queasy, but I quickly got over it. I was fascinated. One of the key tools of scholarly inquiry you employ when studying the New Testament through the historical-critical method is that the Gospels were written by four different authors for four distinct audiences, heavily influenced by politics and culture. A good marketing strategy for a new religious movement.

The Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5, where we find the fullest version of the Sermon on the Mount (also known as the Beatitudes) was written for a Jewish audience. It includes the most references back to Old Testament prophecies (especially regarding the Messiah) and begins each sentence with the words “Blessed are,” an echo of “Baruch atah” – the words that begin nearly all Jewish prayers. “Baruch atah Adonai” – “Blessed art thou, O Lord, Our God.” Jesus would certainly know these prayers. He was born Joshua ben Joseph and was considered a Rabbi, after all.

And Jesus is addressed this way frequently throughout the episode of “The Chosen” I screened this week. The series is well made, and I'll also give them production points for casting the Egyptian actor, Jonathan Roumie, in the title role. He is Middle Eastern, with brown skin and brown eyes, just like Jesus, a Semite from Judea. Not the blonde, blue-eyed Scandinavian Jesus we see hanging in the foyer of Boston parochial schools. I kept waiting to see something in this episode that flipped my switch to “there we go again” idolatry of a man who is good enough as a human being to be admired and followed. But it didn't come. Perhaps if I watch the three existing seasons (of the planned seven), it undoubtedly will.

The series dwells on moments from the daily lives of the characters, with noteworthy events scattered into the episodes. I was especially keen to watch the clip of Jesus delivering The Sermon on the Mount, his most iconic oratory. Roumie is the gentle, warm Jesus I have come to know through Unitarian Universalism. Not quite a Zen master, but a calm and grounded leader and presence.

Historically, Jesus did not preach this sermon to the masses. He offered it more privately to four of his apostles. If a crowd gathered, they stood at a distance. In the clip,

Jesus wakes his apostle Matthew and tells him that he wishes to give him “directions.” He delivers his signature sermon on a hill – Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who mourn.” And then Matthew asks: “Where is the map?” To which Jesus replies: “If someone wants to find me, look among those groups.” Is there a more humanist message than that?

My colleague, the Rev. John Nichols, has penned a collection of UU reflections on Scripture called “A Wind Swept over the Water.” Naturally, he includes one about the Beatitudes. I agree with his notion that Jesus begins by endorsing qualities we don’t usually appreciate such as meekness (which can also be translated here as “humility.”) However, according to Nichols, we can understand the passage this way:

“Blessed are those who do not conceive themselves as rich already, because they know they have much to learn, so there is much more they will learn. Blessed are those who allow themselves to grieve, for by working through their grief they will find a greater strength and confidence in life. Blessed are those who do not stride over the face of the earth as if they own all of it, for they will become much more at home. Blessed are those who hunger for justice, for their efforts will eventually bear fruit, while those who never try will never change the world.”

“Blessed are the compassionate for life will treat them at least as kindly as they have treated others. Blessed are those who are still open to surprise, to challenge, and to love, for their openness will bring them more blessings than they ever imagined.”

I believe that if Jesus returned today, he would recognize the wonderful yet weary world we inhabit and he would get busy. I believe that he would also refute some aspects of the Christianity that was founded in his name. Jim Palmer of the Center for Non-Religious Spirituality offers these examples:

- That a religion was formed to worship him, instead of a movement to advance the message of his ministry, especially the Sermon on the Mount.
- That humankind stands condemned before God and deserves Divine wrath, requiring the death of a wise teacher to fix it.
- That people think there is magical potency in uttering the name of Jesus, rather than accessing their own natural human powers and conscience to effect change.
- That Jesus is meant to be associated with power, exclusion, politics, and doctrines, rather than courage, justice, beauty, and love.”

This misappropriation of Jesus has stirred up quite a bit of concern among some American Christians with deep pockets. In October of 2022, the Singatry Christian Foundation in Kansas launched a \$100 million campaign called “*HeGetsUs*,” blanketing cities and the web, aiming to redeem Jesus’ brand from the damage done by some of his followers. Messages like “Jesus let his hair down too.” “Jesus was lonely, too.” “Jesus had a complicated family, too.” “Jesus was an activist, too, and “Jesus was homeless,

too,” have been posted on billboards in major markets and viewed millions of times on their engaging website. “He Gets Us.” “He is Me” (as our opening poem suggests). Discovering this campaign has been my second Magi gift this week.

Jon Lee, one of the chief architects of the project notes that Jesus said, “people will know my followers by the way they love each other and the way they interact with each other,” and that their goal is for the authentic teachings of Jesus, the ones that real human beings can relate to, be represented more prominently in our culture. And Lee adds, sounding suspiciously like a humanist, that “HeGetsUs” “believes that investing in efforts to ensure more people consider his life and movement as inspiration for their own will in turn help improve the lives of those listening – and begin to create the cascade of love Jesus himself sought to generate.” In essence, the refrain: for they shall know God” in the Sermon on the Mount can be interpreted by us with integrity as “for they shall know goodness.”

Was Jesus a real person? A conflation of many wandering wisdom teachers and mystics and healers of his time? Did he walk on water? Feed the multitudes, decide the salvation of others? Even the foremost Jesus scholars in the world aren’t certain of much. And none of these matters unless you are using Jesus as a weapon or a tool to control people, damn their identities, and extort their money, especially vulnerable folk who just want some hope and some inspiration. I don’t recognize the Jesus of prosperity gospels and coercive fire and brimstone sales pitches. If you focus on his human narrative as a refugee, a homeless baby full of promise and destiny (the one our NAU carolers are singing about this morning), a radical Rabbi and a healer, the Sermon of the Mount is all you may need for inspiration. If you want to donate your money, give it in the direction of the Beatitudes – supporting the most marginalized in our society.

I’ll throw in a third resplendent Magi gift – UU minister Carleton Smith’s new book, Try My Jesus, a curated collection of Gospel passages that affirm, inspire, and comfort. The Rev. Smith wrote this book to heal some of his own wounds from being shunned by his Baptist church in the deep South years ago when he came out as a gay man. He gets that Jesus “gets” him. He writes: “Where before I had memories of preachers denouncing “faggies” and “lezzies,” now there was another voice – one that embodied what life could be like for someone who defined Jesus for themselves. And the message became clearer with time: You don’t have to be a prisoner to other’s beliefs. You don’t have to feel separated from Universal love – open your heart to it so that you and everyone around you are blessed.”

So may it be for us. Open-hearted and blessed and stepping lively, as we follow the directions. Amen.

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