

Welcome

God left Ohio in 2010.

I was living in Dayton at the time, and all the chaos was in Cleveland, about 2 1/2 hours away. The god in question was LeBron James, small forward for the Cleveland Cavaliers and one of the greatest basketball players of all time.

I say he's a god half-joking, but that wasn't a joke in Cleveland. Giant banners adorned the streets with phrases like, "All Hail King James". Even though the arena is called Quicken Loans, there was no question whose house it *really* was. The night he left was a televised event - a whole nation watched anxiously as they discussed whether LeBron would stay in Cleveland, not even 40 miles from his hometown, or go to Miami to play for the Heat. The time of Revelation came, and it was indeed an apocalypse: the King was leaving for sunnier skies.

The city of Cleveland rioted. All over Ohio, people burned LeBron jerseys in the streets. They cursed his name and swore vengeance on his family and legacy. It got, pardon the pun, biblical.

Being neither an Ohio native nor an NBA fan, I watched from a distance, marveling at how quickly their worship of LeBron turned to hatred. I thought at the time it was a sign of their love of LeBron, an expression of the depths of the betrayal they felt.

Then, in 2014, just before we moved to TX, LeBron announced he was returning to Cleveland. I was skeptical. No way those jersey-burning, name-cursing Cavalier fans would take him back!

But Ohioans were *ecstatic*. They threw parades, danced in the streets, rushed out to buy new jerseys to replace the ones they'd burned, started naming babies LeBron again.

That's when it hit me: Cavalier fans don't love LeBron. They don't actually care about LeBron at all. What they love are the wins LeBron brings them. The prestige of having one of the GOATs playing in their city, for their team. They love the perks package that comes with LeBron. Take that away, and they turn on him in an instant. Bring it back and they embrace him without a second thought.

As an outsider to both Ohio and basketball, the hypocrisy was obvious. But when I looked closer at Cleveland's cavalier attitude toward LeBron, I saw my own reflection. Because while I don't care enough about basketball to care one way or another about King James, I have strong thoughts on religion.

And more often than I'm comfortable admitting, we are a lot like the Cavs fans - interested in Jesus not for Jesus' sake but for what he can do for us. Maybe we're looking for a strong family or job security. Maybe it's a sense of inner peace and well-being or bodily health. Or a confidence we're on the right path.

Whatever it is, we have certain expectations of our relationship with Jesus. As long as he fulfills us, we're good. But if we don't get what we want or expect, we become easily disillusioned, putting distance between us and Jesus or possibly even turning away from faith altogether.

Friends, that kind of faith is shallow. It's just as false as the love Cleveland has for King James. Today, we're going to see how Jesus invites us past that shallow faith into something deeper and richer, a faith that isn't interested in changing our circumstances but rather changing us so we can become agents of God's love and healing.

Message

In this season after Easter, we're working through the "I Am" statements Jesus made in the Gospel of John. "I Am" is a translation of Yahweh, the name of God. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear he's God by calling himself "I Am". But he also makes statements like "I am the Way" or "I am the resurrection" to reveal what it means that he is God.

Our series is called "Monday Messiah" because what Jesus reveals to us about his godhood. Jesus came not just for our religious experiences - our Sunday mornings. He came for our everyday lives. That's why he uses images like sheep, vines and bread - though they're strange to us, they were part of the everyday lives of Israel. So we're asking how Jesus matters in our everyday lives. What difference does Jesus make on *Monday*?

[Scripture Slide 1] Today, Jesus claims to be the 'Bread of Life'. The food we need to make it through our days. So it'd be easy to think that what Jesus is talking about here is our daily needs, the basics of life. And again, that's what a lot of people expect from God. We do religion so we can stay healthy, wealthy and wise. We read our bibles and pray and go to Church and give so God will keep us in the black and on our feet and emotionally stable.

Scholars of religion have a term for that kind of religious practice: magical thinking.

Magic is using supernatural forces to change things in the world. And, though we mostly don't realize it, a lot of us treat God essentially like a genie. We go through our religious rituals so that God will do things in our world - little things like less traffic when we're running late to big things like healing relationships and bodies.

That's magical thinking. We're not the first to think that way about God, but Jesus wants us to know that he's *not* a magical Messiah. He didn't come to change a bunch of stuff in the world around us, to be our wish-granter on command.

In John 6, Jesus has just done a magic trick - he fed 5,000 people using only a few loaves of bread and some fish. Then, that night, he sent his disciples across the sea of Galilee and he walked on water. Two amazing signs of Jesus' power. The crowd couldn't get enough, so they crossed the sea and found Jesus on the other side. Guess what they wanted? Let's read:

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went across to Capernaum to look for him. They found him on the other side of the lake and asked, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs. But don’t be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you. For God the Father has given me the seal of his approval.”

They replied, “We want to perform God’s works, too. What should we do?”

Jesus told them, “This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent.”

They answered, “Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” -- John 6:24-30

Jesus calls them out: you're not here because you understood what you saw. You just want another magic trick. And the crowd protests. No, no! We are *all about* what you're teaching us! We promise!

But... well... honestly, we're pretty hungry. And it would *really* help our faith if maybe you could make some more bread?

Hear us out... we're in the wilderness right now. And Moses - he was from God too, remember! When our ancestors were in the wilderness with him, *he* provided manna! And we *know* you're better than Moses, obviously!

So... how 'bout that bread?

Their question reveals that they don't actually get Jesus at all. They want a messiah who's going to do magic tricks for them. Give them bread. Heal them when they're hurt. And, eventually, go to Rome and overthrow their oppressors. They want someone who's going to do what they can't. A supernatural savior. A magic trick messiah.

Listen to how Jesus refuses them:

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“Sir,” they said, “give us that bread every day.”

Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But you haven’t believed in me even though you have seen me...

I tell you the truth, anyone who believes has eternal life. Yes, I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh.” -- John 6:32-36, 47-51

Unsurprisingly, people are creeped out:

Then the people began arguing with each other about what he meant. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked.

But rather than clarify, Jesus doubles down on this troubling image:

So Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. -- John 6:52-56

Why would he be so difficult? This rubs us the wrong way. We want to say, "Jesus, whoa! If you keep talking like this, people are going to leave! You should make it easy for them to stick around! Maybe pass out one more round of bread?"

But here's what Jesus knows: the path he's walking isn't going to the mountain top. It doesn't end with him kicking out Rome and setting up his throne in Jerusalem. That's what the crowd wants. That's what everyone expects from a magic trick messiah. But Jesus' road ends in a Cross. And if you're only following him for the magic tricks, you're never going to make it to a Cross. If you want a genie God, you're going to bail sooner or later. So Jesus decides it might as well be now.

That’s why he talks about eating his flesh, drinking his blood. On this side of the Cross, we recognize that Jesus is pointing to the Communion Meal, when we eat bread as his body and drink wine as his blood. The Communion meal is how we join with Jesus in his death, that we might also share in his new life.

We confess that by following Jesus in his death, he makes us new. In other words, the Cross isn't so much about Jesus fixing all the stuff outside our lives. It's about healing what's dying *in us*. Jesus doesn't change our situations. Jesus changes us so we can change our circumstances.

Some of us follow Jesus for the magic tricks. We want Jesus to do what we can’t do for ourselves: get a better job, a stable family, peace of mind. If what you really want from God is to fix all your problems, you're not going to like the God who insists you pick up your Cross and follow him.

On the other hand, maybe you are here for something deeper, something more real than you've known. Maybe you're ready to start living your life, really living. Maybe you're ready to do the hard work of facing down your shadow self, of overcoming the lies we all believe about ourselves so your true self, the one hidden in God with Christ, can be known. That life, that self is available, but we have to feast on Jesus, to remain connected to him, united with him in death so that we can share in his new life.

[Lectio explanation]

Friends, the way of Jesus is not a cheat code that lets you hack the world around you. It's not a magic spell that gives us supernatural influence. Rather, the way of Jesus is a new way of living in the world, one that connects us to the very source of life so that our truest self comes alive and flourishes in the world.

Jesus doesn't change the world around us. Jesus changes us so that we can become agents of hope and healing in the world around us.

So don't settle for a shallow faith, a magic trick Messiah. The way of Jesus always leads to a Cross, and if you're only here for the benefits package, you're not going to like how the story ends. But if you're here for that real religion, that life-that-is-really-life, then you've come to the right person.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Meal] I want to invite you to Jesus' table, to eat his flesh and drink his blood.

1. When in the last week have I let God challenge and change me?
2. When have I expected God to change my circumstances but not me?
3. What circumstances in the week ahead of me am I asking God to change?
4. How can I be open to God changing me instead?

Assignment

Sacred Reading of John 6:23-56