

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Epiphany 3
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Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
Who is this Jesus?

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. ¹⁷The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, ¹⁹and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. ²⁰He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began to tell them, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." ²²They all spoke well of him and were impressed by the words of grace that came from his mouth. And they kept saying, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" ²³He told them, "Certainly you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' Do here in your hometown everything we heard you did in Capernaum." ²⁴And he said, "Amen I tell you: No prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵But truly I tell you: There were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the sky was shut for three years and six months, while a great famine came over all the land. ²⁶Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow of Zarephath, in Sidon. ²⁷And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was healed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸All those who were in the synagogue were filled with rage when they heard these things. ²⁹They got up and drove him out of the town. They led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the middle of them and went on his way.

—Luke 4:16-30

You have to do something with that figure named Jesus of Nazareth. He is known around the world. He is professed in different nations, cultures, and tongues. His following is too large. His claims are too grand. One cannot be indifferent about such a figure. You have to deal with him. You have to consider who he is. Based on the statements, records, and following of this Jesus of Nazareth, you must look to him and find out who he is. He is either the Lord, a liar, a lunatic, or a legend. So, **who is this Jesus?** Is he the Lord? ...a liar? ...a lunatic? ...or a legend? This is a concept presented by C.S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis' thought has been expounded upon by others adding the option, legend. According to Lewis and those who propose this trilemma, or I suppose quad-lemma now, Jesus of Nazareth is too polarizing a figure to simply ignore. As a responsible citizen of planet earth, one must at least consider who Jesus of Nazareth was. Yet, I am speaking today to a group of people who have more than considered this Jesus of Nazareth. I am speaking today to a group of people who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, know Jesus, confess Jesus, and love Jesus. I know this. So, today I am not going to pretend that you do not know anything about him. Yet, this is the question for our consideration, **who is this Jesus?** This is a question that struck those in the synagogue in Nazareth. This is a question that strikes readers of this text. So, **who is this Jesus?**

Today, we are at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. After having done some miraculous things in Capernaum, Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. Just to play a little catch up if you do not remember the course of where Jesus lived in His life. First, Jesus was born in Bethlehem because of the census taken. Then Joseph, Mary, and Jesus fled to Egypt to spare his life. After all this, Jesus, at a young age, returned with his parents to Nazareth, and that is where he grew up. Now, as an adult, Jesus is in this hometown of Nazareth.

Jesus had a custom of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath. The synagogue was a place of assembly for prayer and studying God's Word. Now, it seems at this point in Jesus' earthly ministry, he had some notoriety. They even had him read the scriptures and teach that day. Someone handed Jesus the scroll of Isaiah. Then Jesus read Isaiah 61. After Jesus read this section, he rolled up the scroll and said that this prophecy was fulfilled in their hearing. When Jesus said this, perhaps the people thought, **who is this Jesus?** Did they recognize at first that Jesus was talking about himself as the fulfillment? Did they recognize how he was fulfilling this prophecy? People were impressed by the words that Jesus spoke.

They spoke well of him. They struggled to understand, though. They wondered and asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" They saw Jesus grow up in Nazareth. They were puzzled at how this could be true. How could Jesus of Nazareth be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy? Perhaps, they scoffed, **who is this Jesus?**

Based on Jesus' response to those in the synagogue that day, we can tell that their question must have had more of a tone of disrespect than astonishment. Jesus responded to them starkly. Jesus knew their hearts. Jesus knew what they really wanted out of him. They wanted a miracle worker. They wanted to see Jesus do what he did in other places. When they heard all of this and thought, **who is this Jesus?** They must have thought he was a miracle worker who came just to make their lives easier... or to give them gifts... or solve their physical problems. But that is not who Jesus is. Jesus states that they did not accept him for who he really was. They were putting Jesus on their terms, not his. Accepting Jesus made in their own image was no real belief in him at all. Jesus illustrated their failure to accept him in his hometown by speaking about what happened in the days of Elijah and Elisha. There were widows and lepers in Israel in those days, but the prophets were sent to the Gentiles. This was because Israel rejected these prophets.

Now enraged, the people of the synagogue got ugly. They went from **who is this Jesus?** To who cares about this Jesus! They wanted to kill him. They literally tried to kill Jesus. A Jesus that didn't do what they wanted... a Jesus that wasn't on their terms... wasn't even worth living in their minds. Jesus of Nazareth was a polarizing figure. People can't just be indifferent about him. This is certainly seen in this account. Amid their response, which can only be described as insane, Jesus decides to use his divine power. He did so to spare his life. Jesus didn't come to just be a miracle worker. He told the people in the synagogue this truth. Jesus used his divine power for a purpose. It was for the sake of his plan. It was not Jesus' time to die. **Who is this Jesus?** He was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He came for a purpose. He came to preach the good news, free captives, give sight to the blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Certain figures in society are so important that one just really should know who they are. Who would you put in a list of influential people that one must know something about? Perhaps you would say George Washington. The first president of an influential world power. It is important to know something about him. Maybe Aristotle... His philosophical approach shapes in many ways how we look at the world. How about Aristotle's teacher Plato? Or you could think of others like Newton, Da Vinci, or MLK. Because of what these men thought, said, and did, it is important as a person to know something about them. You also want to know the truth about them. One does not want to be deceived about such influential figures. One also does not want to just make up information about them. It would be irresponsible to look at such a character and form him in your own image. You should actually know something about these people. Know what they did. Know who they were. Of all great figures, Jesus is the most important to know. If you shouldn't just make up stuff about Alexander the Great, you certainly should not create a Jesus in your own image. One must ask this question, **who is this Jesus?**

As a resident of this world, it is not a wise idea to ignore polarizing figures. Just as bad or perhaps worse is to simply make things up about these individuals, not truly knowing who they were. As I said already, even worse is to do this with Jesus of Nazareth. The people in the synagogue in Nazareth were confronted with the real Jesus, but they didn't want to know who he truly was. They wanted to know him according to their own desires. They wanted a miracle worker. They wanted a different Jesus. Then, when they realized who he really was, they didn't want him at all. When confronted with this polarizing figure, Jesus of Nazareth, do we ever do this? Do we ever look at him, not liking what we see, and try to change or reject him? Maybe you want a Jesus who just gives gifts. But the real Jesus didn't come to just give gifts. Maybe you want a Jesus who doesn't care about sin. But the real Jesus spoke about hell, the punishment of sin, more than others. Maybe you want a Jesus that will just solve all your earthly problems. But the real Jesus said you will suffer in this life. Seeing the true Jesus, desiring someone different, and then rejecting him is not a small deal. You know that is a horrible sin that leads to condemnation. You, dear people of Emmanuel, haven't rejected the true Jesus. So, I warn you. Sin is crouching around the corner. So many people want Jesus to be different. So many people want Jesus to be politically correct. So many people want a Jesus that fits in with the religions of the world. Watch out

for these demonic lies. Denying any aspect of Jesus and His Word is dangerous. Do not fall for the devil's tricks. There are churches out there want you to ignore parts of Jesus. They want you to not care about the truth of who Jesus is. They spread lies about His love. They spread lies about His sacraments. They spread lies about His Word. Watch out for these destructive lies. Perhaps, you have been tempted to deny the true knowledge of Jesus. Perhaps, you have been tempted to think a few lies about Jesus are okay. Perhaps, you have failed to speak out and defend the truth of who Jesus is. If we have failed in any way to look to, support, defend, and promote the true Jesus, we have sinned. Upon reflection, we can see seeds of this rejection of Jesus in our lives. Therefore, we must repent.

As Jesus himself calls us, we repent and believe the good news of who he really is. Jesus is not the Jesus the world makes up, or we make up in our minds, which is a very good thing. Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Jesus came for a purpose. Jesus came to release captives, give sight to the blind, free the oppressed, and declare the Lord's favor. Jesus did this by forgiving all your sins on the cross. As a result, you are released from captivity and oppression. What a wonderful truth that the real Jesus sent by the Father is who he is. And you know him. The Holy Spirit showed you the real Jesus in the Word. The Holy Spirit created faith in your heart to believe in the real Jesus at your baptism. The real Jesus is present with us here and now. Today, the real Jesus gives you His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins through the Lord's Supper. So, **who is this Jesus?** Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and Savior. Jesus of Nazareth came not to be a miracle worker but to free us from the punishment of sin in hell through his life and death. This is Jesus.

Jesus is a polarizing figure. It is important that people know the true Jesus. The Bible tells us about the real Jesus. **Who is this Jesus?** You know him. He is the Savior that gave you his righteousness and the forgiveness of sins. He is the reason you will live forever in heaven. Look at this Jesus! Amen.