

*An Open Question* (John 3.14-21)  
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After reading the lectionary passage early Tuesday morning I asked myself, “So what does it mean to ‘believe in’ Jesus, anyway?” I thought for a moment and then followed with a second question. “And what doesn’t it mean?” I considered the questions together and they brought me a quiet smile. For the questions about Jesus, questions which lie at the very heart of our religious tradition, still felt surprisingly open to me. They are questions that invite me in, to explore who Jesus was and what that might really mean. They are actually questions that invite all of us in if we’re willing to go. “So what does it mean to ‘believe in’ Jesus, anyway?” I wondered. “And what doesn’t it mean?” I poured a cup of coffee, walked into the study, and began to compose an e-mail. The e-mail read: “Friends, I’m doing some work on the question of Jesus this week and I wonder... Would you send me a couple of sentences of your thoughts on Jesus? What does he (or doesn’t he) mean to you? This is something I’m considering with regard to Sunday’s sermon. I may use some of your comments...” It was signed, “Curiously, Jeremy.” On a whim, I sent the e-mail to 46 people.

Throughout the week, I rose in the morning to read five or six e-mails a day from people in this community responding to my question. And what I’d like to do this morning is simply read to you some of the ways we understand Jesus, the things that we do, and in some cases don’t believe at Covenant. The e-mails have been edited for time, but all of the words that follow are quotations taken from people who may well be sitting right next to you in the pews. So how is it that we at Covenant understand Jesus? Here

are at least some of the ways, told in the voices of this community – and now I’m reading from e-mails that you wrote:

*I have always been a person who goes to church and never really understands why...I do not think of Jesus as a god figure, but as a man who struggled as I struggle and somehow did some amazing stuff. I don't really think of him as a hero of mine so much as a role model—someone whose life can give meaning to those around him and [inspire them to] “do good”—whatever that means...Thanks for asking.*

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*For me, God did not create humanity, humanity created God. That God is very real and far more powerful and worthy of praise than any God who would have created the universe. The Jesus story tells about the “ideal man” and what that looked like at a point in history and geography. Who is God now and what is the Jesus story now? Dealing with that question is why I am committed to Covenant.*

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*Jesus is the person who is the example of how I should think, live, be. The “Jesus story” as I have come to refer to it is the story of this man that I learned about as a child...The Jesus story is the starting place for me to create my own life and choose how I will live.*

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*Jesus: [is] A man who is worshipped for how he makes us feel rather than for the harder task of doing and acting as he taught...destined to be the true savior when we fully embrace his teachings. Jesus represents the yet unrealized potential of humanity.*

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*This is off the top of my head hurriedly...[Jeremy,] in another sermon...you quoted Leon as saying to the effect, "It doesn't matter if they are only stories, we need them." Jesus is still the bedrock, the center, the place to go for comfort and strength for me. Do I see Jesus as being divine, or a representation of the divine? Yes. Over the years I have come to see him more as a representation of the divine in me or the potential of the divine in me. Is it possible to be liberal as well as conservative in one's thinking and belief regarding Jesus? I hope so because I have a mixture of all of it in how I see Jesus and seek him for my own comfort.*

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*[The question] stirs up ambivalent thoughts. I have a lot of anger and shame about the way that the name of Jesus is used to empower and support killing, social injustice, and closed-mindedness. But I consider Jesus sacred in the sense that he has embodied love, justice, and an alternative path in this world...*

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*What do I think of Jesus? Interesting question. I probably don't think about Jesus on any kind of regular basis, although Bible stories and theological discussion/reading and so forth are firmly embedded in my subconscious. They seem to bubble up when I need them. I'm not particularly interested in the "quest for the historical Jesus" or the Jesus seminar. That smacks too much of literalism to me... So what's embedded in my subconscious? Jesus as an expression of true humanity—as a human face of God—as risk-taker—as engaging leader—as teacher—as sensitive listener—as enigma—as one whose ethical teachings ring true. **Someone to pay attention to...***

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*I resonate with [William Sloane] Coffin's description of Jesus – that he is a window to God (not a mirror). I can always identify with the disciples and their actions and feel a sympathy and admiration for Jesus as he plods on courageously in spite of the misunderstandings and disloyalties of the people who love him.*

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*Just a couple of sentences? Not an easy task...I'm not sure I could say what it means to "believe in" Jesus. I would be more inclined to say that I "believe in" the possibilities that he presented or pointed to, that he managed to embody in his teachings and in the way he lived his life, the possibility of a human evolutionary change out of patriarchal patterns of power, prestige, property toward some as yet unrealized postpatriarchal economy...He was a prophet in this sense, a man before his time, and insofar as he is still "alive" and in our midst, he is still a man before his time. What he says to me is look around you, look no further than this world, pay attention, especially to the margins and what/who is marginalized...*

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*Jesus, for me is the best revolutionary that I ever read...*

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*What he does not mean to me: God incarnate, intermediary between me and an angry God, performer of miracles (as understood in today's terms), virgin born, resurrected body, future sign of a final apocalyptic event, intermediary who intervenes and spares me from what I face in this life/this world. What he does mean to me: lens through which I see what a relationship with God can be at its best conveying: love, compassion,*

*understanding, peace...love of children, presence to the oppressed, challenger to conventional religion (then and now), spirituality personified...*

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*I do not feel a personal relationship with Jesus. For me his life and teachings (as I understand them) are a standard that I strive, although very imperfectly, to follow and emulate. I believe that God's spirit was in him and still reaches out to others through Jesus' life and his teachings. But I do not believe that he was the one and only Son of God; rather I believe that each of us is a child of the Creator and has [God's] spirit within us.*

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*Isn't this the ultimate question for all Christians? I have rocked along for...[many] years without questioning what I was taught about Jesus before I was ten years of age. The idea that he lived an exemplary life, died a painful death, and was resurrected in order to exonerate us from our sins is powerful to a child. So is the fact that dinosaurs once lived. Since joining Covenant, I have begun to seriously consider/question who God is, and whether or how God might have revealed his/her existence to other people in other places...Could it be that God caused people in many places to question...her existence and characteristics through the...inspiration of the best person they knew?*

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*Over the past few years (starting with my attendance at Covenant) I began to see Jesus, quite simply, as the embodiment of what each and every human being should strive to become. And that seems so incredibly simple, I know, but such an important idea for me... [Jeremy,] I remember...when you talked about those silly bracelets, the WWJD?*

*bracelets that I always hated, and then you asked: What would that really mean?  
To...live by that...and I remember you said things like, to welcome strangers, to break  
bread with the poor, to put down our swords...that has really stuck with me. I think  
about that all the time... Sometimes (often, in fact) I feel like the rich young man in that  
story who goes to Jesus and wants to follow him, and Jesus tells him to give up all his  
riches. I know almost nothing from the bible. But I always remember that line after  
Jesus tells that to the young man: it's something like, "The young man went away sad."  
And I feel like that's me, often, I am the young man who goes away sad. Because I can't  
or rather I don't...make that radical choice...if I did, I think my life would be  
altered...maybe in ways that are truly...unexpected and frightening and dangerous.*

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*Jesus is just alright by me...so goes the song. I think that people identify with what  
they know. We know about being human. And the genius of Jesus is that there is no  
attempt to dismiss the humanity...I don't take the sacred text as an accurate portrayal of  
history, so I don't know that I believe that he even existed. It doesn't matter. The lessons  
I learn when I listen to those stories give me a frame or reference for how I need to  
morally deal with life on life's terms. What I "hear" really makes sense to me – treat  
each other with love and compassion, be respectful to my elders, be willing to risk death  
to live, don't give up when it's hard, there's good even in the seemingly evil. I don't  
know that these words even make sense...*

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*As someone who left active participation in the church as a teenager, I spent most of  
my adult years evading the question of who Jesus was to me. I came to Covenant feeling*

*uncomfortable with the word “Christian” but I had a desire to return to a faith tradition that was ingrained in my youth. Attending worship regularly, befriending Covenant-style Christians and listening to those who have studied the Bible have helped me feel very comfortable with the life and teachings of Jesus. His teachings, when taken literally, are very radical in our age. It seems to me that the dominant forces in Christianity today take much of the Bible literally but dismiss many of Jesus’ teachings since they indeed are so radical. I now feel that I have no problem with Jesus, it’s just the Christians that I am uncomfortable with.*

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*In my rational state, Jesus was a 33 year-old Jew living in a country controlled by the Romans. His message to the world was peace, hope, [and] nonviolence as demonstrations of love to oneself and others. He was not divine, but his message was a hint of what we like to think of as divine. [But] in my childlike state, Jesus is the rescuer who loves ME and will save me from that dark plain of guilt and failure and even maybe greet me in that ether of oblivion and release and forgiveness.*

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*I think of Jesus as being much more than just a good person. To me, he was sent from God as a prophet, priest, and savior, and is divine.*

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*I’m rather attracted to the pissed off, troublemaking Jesus, not the self-righteous-you-don’t-deserve-me Jesus, [but] the why-the-hell-are-you-throwing-stones-at-her? one.*

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*I think Jesus was one of those seeming Superhumans that are born every three or four hundred years. Someone that sees things clearer and has wisdom that is inexplicable. I think he was probably left-handed and didn't wear his shoes unless he had to...*

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*At this point in my journey, I think of Jesus as an itinerant rabbi preaching a radical message that threatened the status quo in his time and place. I struggle to apply his teachings to my everyday life.*

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*Sometimes when I think of Jesus, my thoughts organize around a "Covenant Continuum." I often feel that Jesus means a lot more to me than [he does to] many/most at Covenant. The way I would talk about that meaning has changed so much...But it still holds that powerful mystery and "belief"...Maybe it is that I "feel it – understand it – in my bones" more than it is some kind of intellectual experience. And it is more than I can grasp. A saving reality I can live my life up against... Vassar [Miller] set me with the mystics. I don't understand this much, but I do feel for me Jesus is more than a good teacher, a great example. I think it is something about experiencing the reality of his life and teachings... "throughout myself." I do feel this powerful life is "still alive" in me... This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, shed for you. These words express my experience of Jesus because of...the humanness, the struggle, the giving up that is flesh and blood and breath. So these words are closer to my heart, my thinking than "cup of salvation" "bread of heaven" which [are] too distant and not so meaningful to me. BUT [Jeremy,] your words [at communion time], "Take this. It is myself" go to the very heart of it for me...Might be something to think about.*

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That's the last e-mail I'm going to read, although there were many, many more. As I read the e-mails all week, I felt the strangest sense of gratitude for our liberal church on Caroline Street. For while we have expressed many different understandings of the rabbi at the heart of our tradition, this is a place that not only allows for those differences...but values them. And somewhere, even within the differences, there did seem to be a common thread. Almost everyone who e-mailed said that Jesus places upon us an intense demand to embody love, justice, and peace in the world. It sounds almost impossibly difficult...but in a way we still long for it, still want to find our best selves, still hope to live as deeply and freely as the sacred stories tell us we can. Some people wrote about Jesus from their hearts, others used mostly their heads, but all of the struggles and searching were made plain as the questions were taken utterly seriously. What does it mean to "believe in" Jesus? What doesn't it mean?

The answers to these questions, of course, are not for some preacher to tell you. The answers lie waiting to be found within each of us – in our consciences, in our community, and in our conversation. And for that we might all say, each of us in our own different way, "Thanks be to God."