

Daniel 7: 13-14

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

John 3: 1-15

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"Jesus Man-son"

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Grace be yours, and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

I often say to people that working with youth makes me feel young and old all at the same time. On the one hand, I spend a lot of time with young people, and that makes you feel young yourself, you know? You feed off of their energy and you feel connected somehow to their youth culture. On the other hand I sometimes need three pots of coffee, a pocket dictionary for slang terms, and a top-forty count-down just to keep up with them. This becomes very evident when I try to decipher just what it is that some of them are trying to say to me. I know that this is not a new problem, some of you can probably relate. We live in a time where "coo" means good, "phat" means great, "dog" is a two-legged friend, not a four-legged one, when "cheesy" means lacking in good taste when I happen to like the flavor of cheese, when "wicked" is something positive, and a "crib" is a place you live, not a place you keep your baby safe. And it doesn't stop with the

young, does it? Technology's forced us to learn new languages all the time. Ten years ago nobody knew what in Ipod, Iphone, Itunes, MP3, PDA, on-board navigation, Bluetooth-compatible, wireless-ready, HDTV, voice-activated, flex-fuel, carbon-neutral car that could parallel park itself was. Some would argue whether we've progressed or digressed, but that's another sermon. It was thirty years ago that the computer I now carry home and to the office in a briefcase wouldn't fit in my office.

Times are changing, and they're changing fast, faster than ever. Language is our way with keeping up with that, you see, it's a way of expressing ideas and a way of expressing the culture that we live in, but it has to change with the culture. We think we know what a word or a phrase means, and then that word becomes redefined by somebody to mean something completely different. Or someone just invents a new word, and you have to figure out what it means. So it should not surprise us when we turn to texts that are thousands of years old, and we don't always know exactly what it was the author intended for us to know. Today, we're continuing our series on the various titles for Jesus. We heard from Pam, two weeks ago, and Reverend Schuster was last week. I want to explore the ambiguous history of the meaning behind Jesus as the Son of Man.

We heard the first example of this in the Hebrew scripture from Daniel, the prophet, and his vision of an angel like a son of man. This phrase is meant to describe the physical appearance of a character in Daniel's prophetic vision. Daniel is taking a common phrase in the Aramaic language and applying it to describe his vision for his readers. "One like a son of man," you see, literally means "like a human being." So the angel looked like a human being. Now, I read from the New International Version, as I mentioned, which translates this Aramaic as "son of man." Now the NRSV, which is why I didn't read it, tries to remove this confusion by translating the same phrase "human being." It can mean both. Why would Jesus have been associated with this ambiguous phrase and what does it mean for us today? Let's hope we get somewhere with that today.

I want to begin with the context for John's gospel for the scripture that we heard there. The phrase, the son of man. If you find yourself scratching your heads upon hearing the third chapter of John's gospel, you're probably not alone. We seem to have a faithful follower, Nicodemus, coming to Jesus the rabbi to proclaim his faith. And what does Jesus do? Well, if we look at the Greek, it is clear that Jesus intentionally confuses Nicodemus with a play on words, you see. The Greek word *anothen* can mean both "from above" and "again." So Jesus tells Nicodemus, "You must be born from above," well, Nicodemus mistakes him for meaning "born again." Hence the dialogue there. Why would Jesus greet an affirmation of faith with this? Jesus deflects Nicodemus because his faith is based on the seeing of signs. If you read a little bit before, the third chapter, there's a rebuke of people who believe only because they see signs. John's gospel believing because you have seen is not really believing, you see. Jesus does not perform miracles in John to attract faithful believers. Many of his signs are performed in private for his disciples and those who were healed, and stories of them circulate like rumors among the people. Jesus performed signs, but he is not alone in his time, he is one of many faith healers and sign givers of his day. That's hard for us to imagine sometimes. Wandering the countryside there were many who were doing just what Jesus was doing,

healing people. Jesus makes the point that signs are great, but if that is the only source of our faith, then you are missing the bigger picture.

I was asked by some of the people associated with Camp Hope to preach this Sunday, because I have such a history with that ministry, and I found that as I sat down to write my sermon it was almost impossible to choose from the hundreds of stories I could have to illustrate some points in my sermon from my times at Camp Hope. Eleven years of my life meant so much to me and shaped so much of who I am, to the point that I'm standing here in front of you today. Beside it, I wanted to tell you a story about Colin. He was quick on the video if you were here at the beginning of the service, but he was in it. Colin was probably in his twenties when I knew him ten years ago. He was a very quiet person, he was mostly non-verbal, but he could speak, he just didn't choose to most of the time. He had this interesting talent. He would get to Camp Hope on Monday and he would grab one of these books like we have, we have a bunch of these down in the Youth Basement. There are, let's see, 226 pages in this book, and there's probably about four or five songs per page, and he would start memorizing. He would go through the whole book, and by about Tuesday night, you could ask him the title of a song and he could tell you what page it was on. "Colin, what page is "One Tin Soldier" on?" "One Tin Soldier, page 104, One Tin Soldier." "Colin, what page is "Here I Am, Lord" on?" "Here I Am, Lord, 209, Here I Am Lord." He could tell you what page, even the obscure ones, not just the ones we sang, to the point that there were counselors who would sit on a bench by probably Thursday or so and just thumbing through it, testing him, naming songs that no one has ever heard of, let alone sung, and they're in there, I promise you. The youth can tell you. But it was amazing. But it was a parlor trick, you see. It was sort of a gimmick for Colin. Everybody would gather on Sunday and we would talk about all the campers and those who had experience with camp would share our stories with those who didn't, so that they were prepared, more or less, for the campers' arrival. And we would tell stories about "Oh, and Colin, by Tuesday you can ask him any song in the book and he'll tell you the page, it's really neat, it's lots of fun."

But you see turning that into a trick, turning that into a side show didn't mean, I think, what Colin was all about. It overlooked the fact that Colin was a beautiful human being created in God. And he was. Sure, he could name every page number of every song in that book, but that wasn't who Colin was, that was just one of the things that Colin did. Colin was a beautiful person, still is a beautiful person, I imagine, I hope, and my life is different for having known him. Colin had a bigger picture to his life than just being able to name the page numbers for a song. Jesus points to a bigger picture of God. God's unending love and grace for all creation, you see? You don't need to be supernatural to love. You don't need to be the Son of God to love. I think that Jesus, the Son of Man, is de-emphasizing his own divinity, because he knows that his example of love, and not the supernatural signs of the day, are what will sustain the faithful long after he's gone. Long after the sign-giver is no longer with us. And if you've read John, you know he was pretty sure he wasn't going to be around much longer.

Another way to look at this is a common perspective that takes Jesus' identity as the Son of Man and juxtaposes it with his identity as Son of God. It's easy to imagine that maybe

the Son of God refers to Jesus' divinity, while the Son of Man refers to his humanity. Now, that sounds good, might even make sense, but I find it hard to believe that anything in the thousands of pages of our Biblical witness could be that neat and tidy, and if you've read much scripture, you probably agree. If we read on past where I stopped in John today, we see Jesus using these two titles almost interchangeably, almost. In the famous 16th verse, we see a small shift from Son of Man to just Son. "For God so loved the world that God sent God's only son..." And then in the 18th verse, we have "Son of God." Now, to read it like this, you might be tempted just to say, well, Son of God means Son of Man.

But I think that overlooks a complexity and an intentionality in John's writing. John was not casual with his turns of phrase. This shift, I think, moves us the reader from a focus on the Son of Man, lifted up, on the cross, presumably, to see God beyond the cross, beyond the signs, beyond the Son of Man to see the Son of God. Jesus the Son of Man must be lifted up, like Moses must be lifted up, like a beacon in the darkness of creation, a light, a lighthouse in the world of dark, so that people might see the light and seek its source in God. Jesus then is not a sacrifice atoning for our sins, God sacrificed on God's own altar, so to speak. But instead Jesus is a beacon, calling us to turn from our self-centered preoccupations and to tap into the overwhelming love of God.

I'm always glad to talk about Camp Hope in my sermons, and I'm sure that you will be subjected to many more stories in future sermons. I started at Camp Hope when I was eleven, as a camper, actually. My father was the registrar, and so he could sneak me as a camper because my birthday was at the end of that summer, and so I wasn't quite old enough. You see in those days you could be 12 and they would bring you up as a junior counselor, and they would pair you up with an adult, I wish they still did, but they can't any more. They would pair you up with an adult and you would help them help their camper, throughout the week. It was a fantastic opportunity for me. I had my life enriched, my eyes opened by that experience. I kept going back for eleven years, every summer. Sometimes I would go six or seven weeks out of the year. We're down to two, now, but they're still valuable experiences for those campers. I saw, as a result of that experience, people loving people. You'd see campers come up with all kinds of infirmities and challenges in their lives, physical and mental, verbal and all kinds. Yet they were the happiest people I'd ever met. Not all of them, but most of them. Conditions that would put us into a spiral of depression didn't faze these people. They were truly happy to be in God's beautiful world, with God's beautiful people. They were happy to have a place where they could find people who loved them for who they were. And I can assure you that the people who were there to help them got more from that experience than the campers ever did.

Camp Hope changed my life. It can change yours, too, if you're interested in volunteering I'm sure Greg can put you in contact with people who can let you know about that. It's an amazing experience, these youth and old people coming together, these people with challenges and these "normal" people coming together and just being God's people together in the mountains. It was gorgeous. It was amazing. I can't talk enough

about what it was like. These people were beacons of love and hope, channeling God to the people that came to work with them.

Jesus is a beacon, a beacon calling us to turn from our self-centered preoccupations, and to tap into the overwhelming love of God. The people who come, who came and still come to Camp Hope were a marvelous example to me. Through them I saw that love of God pouring out to people, pouring out to me, a love so radical and revolutionary that it threatened the power structures of Jesus' time and I would say it probably still does today. A threat that must be put down to preserve the status quo but can never really be put down, so long as people follow God's example of love in Jesus' life and teachings. Now, it seems like a small thing, perhaps, as we read the text, but it is just one tiny difference between the phrase we saw in Daniel and the one that we saw in John. In Daniel, it is "a son of man," used to describe something in common terms. In John we have Jesus using the phrase "the Son of Man." Jesus uses the phrase "the Son of Man." We have in the gospels a move to take this common if ambiguous phrase and turn it into a title for Jesus. Some scholars have even pointed out the noticeable lack of explanation about this title, where New Testament writers go to great lengths to define other titles, like the logos, the word of God, or Messiah, or others. These same texts are free of explanations about how Jesus is the Son of Man. Now, the conclusion here is that the title was so universally understood that it needed no further explanation. Now of course that doesn't do us a whole lot of good today, as we try to figure out what it meant. But as we have seen, the phrase "son of man" was a way of saying "human being." Now let's plug that in for just a minute, shall we? If the angel in Daniel's vision is like a human being, then maybe Jesus is the Son of Man, is *the* human being. Think about that for a minute – Jesus is *the* human being. In the theological world of Christology, you can think about Christ on the spectrum. On one hand, you have people who might believe that Jesus was more God than human. And on the other side, you might have people who believe that Jesus was more human than God. Most of us end up somewhere in between, whether we know it or not. But think about this for a minute. Jesus as *the* human being becomes for us an example of what it means to be truly human. Humanity has strayed from our own nature to become less than human, and Jesus is God's way of calling us back to that which is essentially human, essentially us, what we have been created to be.

In my work with Camp Hope over the years it became clear to me that I got more out of working with those people at camp than they ever did by working with me. As an eleven-year-old volunteer I had my eyes opened to a new way of thinking about what it means to be human. I spent most of my time playing and dreaming about what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't think about in those terms, what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, at eleven. All I knew was that I was part of something special, at camp. When I returned to my daily routine of playing and dreaming and disliking school, as most my age did, I was different. But in my work with Camp Hope I discovered the joy of living, no matter what the conditions. I'd been changed. My eyes had been opened to the fact that life can be great, no matter what happens.

Another camper I want to share with you is a boy named Jeff. Now, Jeff was in a wheelchair. He couldn't really move his arms or his legs, you had to pull him out of his

chair about every three hours and lay him on mats his parents would bring up and stretch him out so he wouldn't get too stiff. And he couldn't really talk. He had this blinking thing, he could blink "yes" or "no" for you, most of the time. But he could laugh. That was about all the sound he could make, he could laugh. He had to be fed Ensure through a tube in his stomach – there was a lot going on with this kid. We had this program at camp where we brought over horses from TipTop Ranch, which was just down the road from Buckhorn, and the ranchers there would help the campers who had permission forms to ride the horses. They would get up on the horse and the people from the ranch would sort of lead them along and back. But they had to sign this release form, you see, to make sure that the parents knew we were doing this. We'd all gather on a Sunday night to talk about the campers, as I mentioned, and one of the things that came up was, "Did you see that Jeff's parents signed the release form for Jeff to ride the horse?" We had all seen this, Jeff couldn't even stand up or talk or bend his own arms or legs. How was he going to ride a horse? We thought. But the day came. We had the parents' permission. We double-checked when they came up to drop him off, and the rancher, who was this big, burly guy looked at me and said, "Get up on the horse." I'm not a horse person. I love horses, they're fun to ride. I am not a skilled horse rider. But I got up on the horse anyway. His assistant had the horse at the front, He said "Okay, out your hands on the horn of the saddle." Okay, so I did that, and it created this nice little basket. And he scooped up that tiny boy, and he put him in my arms, and I just held him there, as the helper walked the horse up the road about twenty feet and turned around and walked him back. The whole time, Jeff is just howling, just laughing so hard, he was having the greatest time.

He showed us all, you're not limited by what you do. You're not limited by who you are. He found a way, because of a rancher and a reluctant counselor and a very steady horse. I witnessed Jeff overcome any fear he might have had, and there was a lot to be afraid of, I suppose. The fear to do something people said he could never do, even the people who were there to love and work with him. I witnessed campers moved to tears by a song sung at campfire worship. I witnessed a charismatic camper in his own wheelchair hold court like a jester entertaining the crowds. I witnessed people facing lives of challenge and adversity while sucking joy out of every moment of life. I witnessed people loving people in an overwhelming show of humanity, tapping into its greatest potential for love. Jesus reveals a potential in humanity that is ignored, I think, to this day.

We are drawn to Jesus' signs like Nicodemus - even the resurrection is a sign - and we miss the point that I think is so important. Christians become so enamored with escaping this mortal life to something better, like rats off a sinking ship. With Jesus' example of humanity's potential for love, we can right the ship. We don't have to abandon it. We can right it. We can overcome the darkness of this world with the light of God's love shown in us. I've seen it, in the loving care given by counselor to camper, and I've seen it in the loving care given by camper to counselor. No matter where you come from, out of the creation, no matter where you come out on "how" of creation, the ancient Hebrew passage in Genesis reflects for us a great truth, that humanity is created in God's image. Whether we got there through evolution or some other form is, frankly, for me, irrelevant. But I believe that image of God in us is an untapped potential for love. That is how we

are like God. That is how we are in the image of God. Jesus becomes the example of humanity, tapping into that love and living into our God-likeness. Like Daniel's angel that looks like a human being, we can become in this world human beings that look like God, in that we love, we live into our potential as created in the image of God, to love. Jesus the Son of Man, the human being, *the* human being, is an example of humanity at its best. Jesus is a beacon in the dark creation, pushing us beyond our own mediocrity and into the endless potential of our own humanity. Jesus the Son of Man shows humanity how to be truly human, how to love like God, how to be sons and daughters of humanity. The potential is there. It is our task in life to make sure that that potential is realized. Amen.