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Book Review
of
"The Jesus I Never Knew"
by
Philip Yancey

"The Jesus I got to know in writing this book is very different from the Jesus I

learned about in Sunday school. In some ways more comforting, in some ways more terrifying” (Yancey, from the back cover). I have read books from several Christian writers. Some, like Brennan Manning, I like and others, like Max Lucado, I don’t care for. (He’s just too syrupy for my taste, but I haven’t read everything he’s written, so that might be an unfair assessment). I had heard of Philip Yancey, but I’d never read any his books or heard him speak, so I was eager to dive into this book. I thought, in addition to reading “The Jesus I Never Knew”, I would hunt up a few of his videos on YouTube. I chuckled to myself because he reminds me of the late Bob Ross; the gentle, optimistic painter from PBS who, coincidentally, is very much like the sweet, quiet Jesus I knew growing up. “It’s ok if you make a mistake. This was going to be a bird, and now it’s a tree.”

The Jesus I Never Knew is well written, as befitting a former journalist, and there are many thoughts of interest that I will highlight, but on the whole I didn’t have any real “a-ha” moments. There were several things he said that did me make go “mm-hmm” though. I experienced recollections, not revelations. Yancey’s experience with coming to know Jesus is similar to my own. We both grew up with the tame Jesus of coloring books and Sunday school rhymes. We also both came to a realization that the Jesus of our youth is not the Jesus of the truth. (Hmmm, that might make a good title; someone should write that down).

“That, I concluded, was the problem with most of our writings and thinking about Jesus. We read the Gospels through the ‘flash-forward’ lenses of church councils...through the church’s studied attempt to make sense of him” (Pg 24). That led to some interesting thoughts. Even as we read the Gospels, we tend to filter what we

read through the lens of our experiences and education. It takes intentionality and guidance from the Spirit to lay that aside and see Jesus as presented in the New Testament without retrofitting His life to dovetail with the accumulated knowledge of the last two thousand years.

Our minds tend to delete or distort those sayings or ideas that conflict with what we've been taught. I was friends for a time with one of the drummers from the band Boston. I told him I had seen them play years before and thought it was impressive how they were able to recreate the exact sound from their multi-platinum, overdub rich records. He laughed and told me they actually didn't sound ANYTHING like their recordings when performing, that my mind simply filled in what I had expected to hear. I think that's what happens when we read about Jesus. We tend to read into His story what we have known and makes us comfortable, so, we must be diligent in pursuing Jesus as He is, even the hard-to-deal-with parts.

"I return again and again to the same questions, as if fingering an old wound that never quite heals. Does God care about the misery down here? Do we really matter to God?" (pg 17) Yancey recounts being snowbound for two weeks without anything but a Bible to read. "In the Old Testament I found myself identifying with those who boldly stood up to God: Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, the psalmists...Job was most brazen, flinging to God this accusation: 'Do you have eyes of flesh? Do you see as a mortal sees?' Of the many reasons for the Incarnation surely one was to answer Job's accusation: 'Do you have eyes of flesh?' For a time, God did" (pg 18). I like the way Yancey put this. As has been discussed in class, it is important to understand that Jesus was fully human and fully divine; anything less than that would reduce the Incarnation to

a masquerade. We would always doubt if He actually felt as we felt or hurt as we hurt.

There are people who dress up like animals and truly think they are a dog or a cat. (Yes, it's as bizarre as it sounds). They wear fur costumes - complete with collar(!) - crawl on all fours and drink out of bowls, yet they are still human. They don't experience life as a domestic pet does and they don't lack the understanding of events around them as animals do. There was a movie from the eighties called "Project X" with Matthew Broderick. He and a team of scientists are training chimpanzees to pilot rocket ships. Once trained, the plan was to bombard the chimps with radiation to see how long they would be able to pilot the ships before succumbing to poisoning. After developing a bond with one of the chimps, Broderick tries to convince the scientists to spare the animals. In making his case, Broderick's character shares this observation: it's a useless experiment because the chimps would not realize they are dying, as a man would. Knowing that you are dying dramatically changes your behavior. If Jesus had not been fully human, then He would not truly realize what it was to laugh, weep, run, play, suffer and die. His "humanity" would have been a charade.

"Two words one could never think of applying to the Jesus of the Gospels: boring and predictable. (The church) ... very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him as fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies" (pg 23). Later in the book Yancey quotes C. S. Lewis' observation that it would not have occurred to the people of Jesus's time to consider Him just a nice man or a moral teacher. "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be considered a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse” (pg 263). As Yancey states, “He was either the Son of God sent to save the world or an imposter deserving of crucifixion. The people of His day understood the binary choice precisely” (pg 263). In order to completely appreciate how radical Jesus was we must place ourselves in the sandals of those with whom He walked.

In his chapter Resurrection: A Morning Beyond Belief, the author describes his first encounter with death. His beloved kitten, Boots, was killed in front of him by a neighbor’s pet Pug on Easter Sunday when he was five years old. He then recounts that as an adult he lost three dear friends in one year and he was struck by how irreversible death appears. This led Philip to meditate on Jesus’s resurrection. “As a five year old on Easter Sunday I had learned the harsh lesson of irreversibility...as an adult I saw that Easter actually held out the awesome promise of reversibility. Nothing - no, not even death - was final. Even that could be reversed” (pg 211). This was eloquently told and it brought to mind when I first realized the depth of the resurrection. I was reminded how I felt last January when my mother died. She had seemed fine until the previous November when she went to a doctor because of persistent headaches. They discovered stage-four lung cancer which had metastasized to her brain. I was devastated. I was able fly up to New England and see her twice before she passed. The second visit was mostly my holding her hand as she was heavily sedated most of the time, but for my first visit she was very coherent and we had the chance to talk a bit. My mom was Catholic and although she hadn’t had a born again experience, she did have a great deal of faith. She consoled her grieving son by talking of God’s Son and that she knew she was going to heaven. I wasn’t as sure of that as she was. Not that she

wouldn't go to heaven, but if heaven even truly existed. I had lost my dad eight years before, but he had been sick for awhile and it was expected. My mom was gone in under 3 months, and even though fifty-three, I was having a difficult time processing her quick, painful death. Her funeral was small and very short, per her request. Having grown up with formal funerals I have to admit I felt a little cheated. I had hoped to hear passages about His being risen and to hear a few songs about eternal life. How selfish I was being! This isn't about me. I then made myself think of her and our last brief conversation about her surety that she would be with Jesus, and the idea of resurrection took on a new semblance of reality.

Yancey quotes Rollo May, "I was seized then by a moment of spiritual reality: what would it mean for our world if he truly had risen?" (pg 211). He then tells of when he spoke at his friend Bob's funeral. "How would it be to walk outside to the parking lot and then, to our utter astonishment, find Bob. *Bob!* With his bounding walk, his crooked grin, his clear gray eyes. It could be no one else but Bob, alive again...Easter hits a new note of hope and faith that what God did once in a graveyard in Jerusalem, He can and will repeat on a grand scale. For Bob. For us. And the world" (pg 211).

The best authors, speakers, artists and comedians remind us of truths that we knew once, but perhaps have allowed to recede into memory. Yancey has the ability to bring to vivid recollection the truth about my Savior that I hadn't quite forgotten, but perhaps need to spend more time with. Thanks for recommending this book to us.