

## THE MESSAGE

April 25, 2010

Acts 13:13-26

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*Our Mission*

Picture Jesus. Close your eyes if you wish. What does he look like to you. His facial expression. His body language. His hair color and length. How is he dressed? What color are his eyes? His skin color? Okay, got an image of Jesus in your mind. You can open your eyes now. I don't want anyone to fall asleep.

It would be fascinating to go around the room and each one of us share what Jesus looks like to us. For me. I see Jesus with a flowing robe, long, black, untamed hair, dark skin and cool sandals, with a "WWID" bracelet (*What Would I Do* - bracelet) on his wrist. I also see something about Jesus that draws people to him. They just want to be with him.

Oddly enough, the Bible doesn't say much about Jesus' physical appearance. Isaiah comes close, but it's not real flattering. Isaiah writes, "*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*"

According to Isaiah, Jesus wasn't much to look at, just a regular guy. He looked like any other guy in that part of the world at that time – dark skin, dark eyes, beard, long, dark hair – nothing out of the ordinary physically.

Have you ever noticed the artwork of Jesus? Every culture seems to make Jesus look like the people of that culture. That may not be physically or historically accurate, but there is a certain theological rightness to it. Jesus is the Savior of all humanity. He became one of us. Jesus took on our nature and our lot -- to die on the cross and take away the sins of the entire world.

So when we see Jesus on the cross, we see ourselves, no matter what our culture. I see that as a good thing. After all, the last words Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel are these: "*Remember, I am with you always.*"

It's appropriate then that we picture Jesus like ourselves no matter who we are. That's why we can begin our worship with the words, "Whoever you are and wherever you are in your journey of faith you are welcome here at Friedens." Jesus welcomes everyone. So... how does Jesus look to you?

We continue our study of Acts, and today we find Paul on his first of three missionary journeys. Paul and Barnabas have traveled some 300 miles to Antioch from Jerusalem. Antioch was an important Roman colony located in what is today West Central Turkey. In addition to the Romans, Greeks, Asians and Phrygians who lived in Antioch, the city had a large Jewish population.

Paul was in the habit of “going to church,” so to speak, to the local synagogue to share the good news about Jesus. He would paint a picture of Jesus his hearers could relate to. He always starts where they were.

When Paul spoke to Greek philosophers in Athens, he began with a casual conversation about their beautiful city, and then talked about the universal implications of the Gospel. In today’s reading, Paul is speaking to a group of devout Jews, and starts with their sacred history. Paul painted a picture of Jesus that would meet people where they were.

That’s how God is. God meets us where we are. God comes to us and meets us right where we are. That’s grace.

The Bible offers all kinds of images of God meeting us where we are:

If we’re lost, God is our shepherd.  
 If the foundation of our lives is shaken, God is our rock.  
 If we’re feeling weak, God is our strength.  
 If we’re in bondage, God is our deliverer.  
 If we’re in danger, God is our rescuer.  
 If we’re in the dark, God is our light.

How has God met you right where you are, at just the right time?

I grew up very active in a Lutheran church. Okay, let me set the record straight, I grew up with my parents dragging me to a Lutheran church.

I went through all the hoops, 12 years of Sunday school, 2 years of confirmation, 4 years in the youth group. I was an acolyte, an assisting minister. I sang in all three choirs – children, youth, and adult. I was a Sunday school teacher for 2 years, a youth group advisor for 2 year. I served a three year term on church council and that was all before I was 18. I was over-churched. I was all but churched-out before I became an adult.

Never, never in all that church stuff did I meet Jesus. I knew a lot *about* Jesus but I never *experienced* him. Never once did I feel God’s presence in my life by jumping through any of those church hoops. I have nothing against the church. Please hear what I am saying. I’m just wondering if perhaps we’ve missed something.

The first time I felt God’s presence in my life was outside of the church. I was 19, a wild and crazy 19-year-old. I’m older and wiser now but at times I still act like I’m 19.

Here’s the story: My brother-in-law, Timothy, was 24. (Who by the way our son, Simon Timothy is named after). Timothy, my brother-in-law, was killed in a tragic tractor accident one night and I was right there by his side. At 19 in the middle of a very

dark night I realized how precious life in this world truly is. That night forever changed my life in so many ways and I realized, at 19, what is truly important and what isn't.

That's was the first time God met me right where I was. I remember watching the police, the rescue crew, and the ambulance drive away with Tim's lifeless body. So, I got into my 74 VW Bug and started driving - aimlessly. It was somewhere in the drive that dark night that I sensed God's presence in my life. I remember stopping the car and realizing that no matter where I went, God was with me. I wasn't alone.

I didn't know it at the time but looking back now I realized that night Jesus became my GPS for life. Life is a journey from the cradle to the grave and along life's highway God meets us where we are in good times and in bad.

Jesus didn't meet me as the Lamb of God who takes away my sins, although he is that. Jesus didn't come as King to sit on the throne of my life, although he is that, too. Jesus met me in a life and death situation.

His death and his resurrection became all the more powerful for me. That is why I am what I am and why I do what I do. I'm not in charge of my life – Jesus is. And I have given my life to his mission work in the church for the sake of the world that God loves.

I do not deserve to be a parish pastor. It is only by the grace of God that I am here. I jumped through all the hoops to get a Masters Degree from Gettysburg Seminary and Doctorate Degree from Hartford Seminary. I can honestly say, they mean nothing to me and they don't make me who I am. I am nobody special. I am a servant of the Lord, period. And so too are you. Jesus makes us who we are.

More and more everyday I realize that God knows exactly what I need and God provides it through scripture, prayer, and the Holy Spirit at work in my life. I didn't choose this path – God did. I strive everyday to live my life in response to what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in my life. God continues to send Jesus to be my GPS.

My hope and prayer is that you come to see Jesus in a similar way, if you haven't already. Because together God is calling us to help more and more people come to know not *about* Jesus but to *experience* Jesus presence fully in their lives.

So what does that mean? Two things:

First, I invite you to see our work in and through the church as being the *means* not the *end*. Participation in the church isn't the goal but the beginning. It's the means for us to be a vehicle of God's grace in the world. We go to share Jesus with others not with a memorized script but with a living relationship with him. We go to share Jesus with others.

It isn't our seating capacity that's important but rather our sending capacity. We are sent people – sent to let Jesus shine in us and through us in ways that connect with more and more people. That's what Paul did. That's what we're called to do, too, to connect with people because we are connected to Jesus.

Second, I believe it's a great time to be the church. We really don't know what tomorrow might bring but we do know that God meets us where we are and offers us a living hope for living every day. Hope for a hurting and hostile world.

So pray with me this week that Jesus will meet you right where you are, right where you need him. This isn't about what we can do. It's about what God wants to do in us and through us. I'm looking forward to see where our faith will take us next -- as we seek ways to help more and more people grow in the faith -- living the faith in our everyday world.

I don't know what Jesus looks like to you, but I know that wherever you are on your journey of faith, that's where he'll meet you and guide you in your next step for his mission in the world that God loves. Amen.