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Date: December 10, 2017
Sermon Title: What Child Is This?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Isaiah 53:1-8

Isaiah 53:1-8

*Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?*

*For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.*

We'll end today's worship with my favorite Christmas carol that asks the big question:

*What child is this who laid to rest
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
while shepherds watch are keeping?*

The whole verse is one big question, "What child *is* this?" What child is this to warrant such hoopla 2,000 years ago of shepherds and angels and Wise Men? Plus the hoopla of today: six weeks of Christmas shopping, Christmas songs, Christmas specials, Christmas cookies, and for us, a whole lot of Christmas Church services. "What child is this?"

Our Church Bible study this year is working through the Gospel of Luke. We are only a few chapters into it, but it's already filled with people asking, "Who the heck is this guy?" "Who does he think he is?" "By what authority?" People keep asking, "By what authority do you heal the sick?" "By what authority do you change the rules?" "By what authority do you teach us to care for everybody?" "By what authority do you confront evil?"

Right up to the end of his life, people were asking, "Who is this guy?" "What kind of child is this?" "What kind of person?" "What kind of Messiah?" "What kind of God is this?"

Our Church is deeply involved in work in India. We have 17 going over there with Alida right after Christmas, and a major medical team is going in mid-January. We've been doing this for 35 years. We have deep and abiding friendships over there among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, and I've talked with them at great length, in great depth. And one thing they tell me is that a big stumbling block to Christianity in India is that the *idea* of Jesus doesn't compute, doesn't make sense, doesn't fit in with what people would expect from the Son of God.

Muslims reject Jesus out of hand as any kind of divinity and most especially rule out the crucifixion, 100 percent. No God would do it. No God would allow it. It makes no sense, and therefore cannot be true. End of discussion.

Likewise, within Hinduism, the idea of Jesus as the "suffering servant," as our "atonement" or "sacrifice" on the cross, that's not the popular idea of God at work in the universe. Hinduism is filled with gods and goddesses of majesty, of power, of military might, of splendor, of superhuman reality, of extraordinary feats, that bound over mountains and streams. They have Superman and

Wonder Woman. We have Casper Milquetoast or Casper the Friendly Ghost. We get a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, in an outside stable, born into poverty, under oppression. Thirty-three years later, he's executed on a cross, wrapped in burial cloths, laid in a borrowed tomb, still poor, still oppressed.

And in between the anonymous birth and the ominous death, he lives a humble life, touching the Untouchables, befriending the friendless, and teaching the impossible. "Love your enemies," he said. "Turn the other cheek." That's nobody's idea of a Savior.

So, I think it's good at Christmastime to ask, "What child is this?" I think it's good at Eastertime to ask, "What kind of Savior is this?" I think it's good in between to ask, "Who is this guy?" "By what authority" does he dare to turn our world upside down and turn us inside out? Which may actually be the point. It seems that God decided we humans didn't need to be awestruck. We needed to be turned inside out.

Sexual harassment: I threw that in there to see if you're still listening. Well, O.K., then, "sexual harassment." What a two-month period this has been. I can barely remember Harvey Weinstein after I've been dragged through the mud listening to stories of Matt Lauer, Bill O'Reilly, Charlie Rose, Al Franken, Roy Moore. James Levine? Are you serious? The N.Y. Metropolitan Opera conductor? Garrison Keillor? The "Lake Wobegone" guy? Plus the rehash of all the Clinton women, all the Trump women, more clergy, more actors.

Wasn't there a TV show, "Men Behaving Badly"? Hard to believe it was ever canceled. Did they run out of storylines? Or has it gotten just so doggone repetitious, it's boring?

This isn't going to be a sermon about sexual harassment. I sent out a pastoral letter to all of you, which, at latest count, has been read a thousand times, and I've heard back from many of you. Chapter 4 of *My Habitat* book is as good a case study on the issue as you are likely to find. So I'm not rehashing all that again.

More to the point of today is that our nationwide sexual harassment bonanza is just Example No. 1,000 (or maybe 1 million) that God was right: folks need to be changed from the inside out, from within. We need to know what's right to do, and what's wrong, in our hearts.

The legislators have the job of making laws; the courts arbitrate and adjudicate those laws. The police enforce the laws. All that's well and good. But at our most basic level, where you and I live our daily lives, it's what's in our hearts that counts.

When I was a kid growing up, we had a prominent painting in the house of Jesus standing outside a house, knocking on the door. The painting illustrates a great Bible verse from Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come and dine with them.” What a poignant image! Jesus, outside your house. Knocking on the door. Hoping to be invited in. For dinner.

That verse was written 60, 80 years after Jesus left this earth. And there is nobody in a long robe and a beard outside our houses, knocking on the door. That’s why everyone agrees, all the scholars, it’s symbolic: Jesus is knocking on the door of our hearts—your heart, my heart. Wanting to get in to where you and I decide what kind of people we’ll be. Our hearts. Not our heads. Our head is where we decide what we can get away with.

I mention the sexual harassment thing because aside from the rotten behavior of a lot of people, the other troubling part of the story is the rotten, lame excuses provided by the Christian fans of some of these folks. Twisting the Bible, twisting the facts, twisting religion, even twisting the Christmas story itself to defend gross behavior.

True! An Alabama state legislator defended Roy Moore by declaring that Joseph was an older man when he married Mary. That’s weird on so many levels, but let’s dismiss him with this—he seems to have missed the whole “virgin birth” part of the Christmas story!

Christianity needs to stand up *TO* stuff like this not *FOR* stuff like this. That happens only if our Christianity comes from deep within, not just surfacy. I heard a scholar describe Christianity in some places as “a mile wide but only an inch deep.” Jesus came to take us deep, to take us beyond law, beyond surface, beyond what we can get away with.

I went to see a movie on Friday that I don’t think most of you will see, so I can tell you the story. It’s a Hungarian film called “1945.” The Nazis have fled Hungary; the Russians have stayed. And life in a little village is returning to normal. One morning, a train arrives. Two Jews get off the train, carrying a heavy box. They hire a car to carry the box through town to the abandoned synagogue. They say nothing. As the two Jews walk silently through the small village, people panic. Each one guilt-ridden, afraid, ashamed.

They all remember what they did when all the town’s Jews were taken away. They know who snitched. They know who betrayed. They know who laughed. They know who profited. They know what they did or didn’t do, what they said or didn’t say. Yet, the little village is a place of outward religious Christian faith. They all greet one another at every passing with “God bless you.” They say the Lord’s Prayer, they cross themselves. The village Church holds the most prominent place in town. The priest helps run the town. The Church is full for worship. Crosses are prominent everywhere.

But when it mattered, all those Christians, they did nothing . . . or did worse; they said nothing . . . or said worse. Their Christianity was indeed “a mile wide and hardly an inch deep.”

The answer to "What child is this?" Or "Who is this guy?" Or "By what authority" does he do and say, and what he does and says, the answer is provided by Jesus himself. He talks about being "the salt of the earth," "the leaven in the bread," "the light of the world." Each one of those items changes the situation around. Salt gives flavor. Leaven yields substance. Light . . . well, light lightens, doesn't it? That's supposed to be us.

We are the opposite of the popular phrase, or excuse, "It is what it is." That's how the Christians in the little Hungarian village thought. "It is what it is." Nazis want the Jews? Fine. I get their silverware.

That's what put women whistleblowers on the cover of *TIME Magazine* as a collective "Person of the Year." We've seen "It is what it is" forever: men in power, stars, celebrities, saying, "You want something?" "You want to be in pictures?" "You want a promotion?" "You want an opportunity?" "Here's the game"

Jesus comes along and says: "Life is not a game. Life is life." And to live life fully is *not* to do what we can get away with. To live life fully is to live life right. And Jesus came to elevate our idea of what is right.

Now, let's sing that Christmas carol as though we know the answer to the question "What child is this?" No.162

*What child is this, who, laid to rest
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch are keeping?*

Refrain:

*This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
haste, haste to bring him laud
the babe, the son of Mary.*

*Why lies he in such mean estate
where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading: [Refrain]*

*So bring him incense, gold and myrrh,
come, rich and poor, to own him,
the King of kings salvation brings,
let loving hearts enthrone him. [Refrain]*