

One New Book for the Preacher

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MEETING JESUS AGAIN FOR THE FIRST TIME: THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE HEART OF CONTEMPORARY FAITH by Marcus J. Borg. HarperSanFrancisco, 1994. 150 pp.

The so-called “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus,” represented by the work of John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and others, has begun its journey from the halls of academia to the public square. The Jesus Seminar gets a page in national magazines each Lent, though the journalists typically portray the endeavor as a mysterious ritual involving colored beads. Beneath the superficial portrayal of this movement is much insight to enrich preaching.

As a preacher, I stand in the midst of a conversation not only between congregation and scripture, but including scholarship new and old which also converses with us as we seek meaning for our lives in ancient words.

When I read “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time” I encountered a welcome conversation partner who could contribute much to the task of interpreting the gospel to a congregation. I enjoyed becoming reacquainted with Jesus, seeing through Borg’s eyes a Jesus more complex, more passionate, and more truly human than others scholars present. Rather than attempting to present scholarship unadulterated by personal concerns (which is likely impossible anyway), Borg is forthright about his own struggles of faith which have contributed much to the direction of his scholarship, and discusses how his study of Jesus has strengthened his faith. As is true for Borg, my own faith journey has involved a distancing from both organized religion and traditional theology, and the challenges he makes to many traditional perspectives of Jesus were heartening to me. There are certainly problems with the notion that we can “get behind the text” and determine who Jesus was independent of the text itself, and this is where we might call into question some of Borg’s conclusions. However, I see as indispensable his effort to show Jesus in the context of the Judaism of his day and his contention that we cannot understand Jesus without some attention to this context as well as to the macro-stories of the Old Testament (Exodus, Priestly, Exile).

I enjoy engaging with partners like Borg. As a pastor, I savor the few moments I can seize to rejuvenate my mind and get the theological “juices” flowing with something new in biblical or theological scholarship, though often the theological exploration is eclipsed by scrambling for a nursery attendant for next Sunday or trying to fan a flickering spark of interest in this fall’s stewardship campaign. As pastors, typically we welcome new developments in scholarship because these new avenues of thought keep preaching and teaching interesting and stimulating. Like new software to a computer lover, the “new books” shelf at the seminary bookstore provides an exhilarating addition to the playground of ideas.

But if you just want a computer to “do the job,” and find computerese tedious or intimidating, new software is a dreaded prospect, perhaps something to shun altogether. Could the same be sometimes true for theology and the person in the pew? There is danger in assuming that what is fresh insight to a pastor is the same for a

parishioner. What opens up theological vistas for a preacher may seem a desecration of sacred ground to one in the pew. Or what has become “old hat” to a seminary-educated speaker may be shocking to the listener.

This is not to say that we should retreat from speaking words of challenge from the pulpit. If we believe in the work of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the Word, we believe that the “Old Old Story” speaks with a new voice in our own time, a new voice which may at first sound dissonant and no less scandalous than it did to its first hearers. But I am experiencing a need to be more aware of how the theological perspectives I present are received by those who hear them, to know whether they confuse, enlighten, or enrage. I fear that we may discount the impact of our words, and sometimes fail to offer the pastoral care necessary to help people incorporate new perspectives into their faith. Too often, certainty (and therefore resistance to change) has been touted as the prime indicator of strong faith. Folks like Brueggemann have encouraged us to consider otherwise.

Sometimes we who are steeped in theology voice as foregone conclusions ideas that sound strange at the least, heretical at the worst to those seeking spiritual nourishment from our Sunday morning ruminations on scripture. Most of the time hearers walk away from the sermon and we never know its impact. The kind of feedback I receive about a sermon is what can be said easily and politely during a handshake in the foyer after worship as a child tugs at mom’s coat insisting “We’re gonna be late for my soccer game!”

Seeking a model whereby I could solicit feedback about perspectives likely to show up in my sermons, I asked four members of the congregation I serve to read Borg’s book and discuss it with me as a group. To my view this is preferable to asking for critique of specific sermons, as some might be reluctant to come across too critical of the preacher. The two men and two women do not represent a random sampling from the congregation. They are all people with whom I have had recent theological discussions and who enjoy reading. All are college educated and all could probably be classified as “Baby Boomers.”

Kathy, a lifelong Presbyterian, was confirmed under a pastor from Scotland, with whom she credits giving her a faith centered in the trinity, flexible and open to new ideas. He instilled in her the outlook that the Bible did not have to be taken literally to be taken seriously. Kathy described the book as “thought-provoking.”

Denise, daughter of a United Methodist minister and an occupational therapist, described the book as “countercultural.”

Gerry, former vocational education teacher who grew up in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, commented that the book jacket’s claim that Borg uses simple language for lay readers was wrong. He found himself spending as much time reading the dictionary as he did the book.

Mike, a pharmacist who has spent most of his adult life at a distance from “organized” religion said of Borg’s Jesus: “This is a Jesus I could believe in.”

I asked each person to respond to several questions about the book, such as what they found most interesting or helpful about the book, what aspects they found disturbing, and what impact reading the book has had on their faith.

Kathy found the notion of Jesus as “Spirit Person” most interesting. This concept centers in the humanity of Jesus, which to Kathy is most significant to her faith. It is Jesus as human more than Jesus as divine that she finds compelling. Kathy noted that

Borg's understanding of a spirit person as one who is so in touch with God that she lives in harmony with the will of God puts into words conclusions that she had reached, but has been unable to articulate herself.

In the last chapter of the book, Borg describes three "macro-stories" found in scripture: the Exodus story, the story of exile and return, and the priestly story. Borg suggests that each macro-story images the human condition uniquely and depicts the human-God relationship differently. Kathy agreed with Borg that the Christianity she is most familiar with has concentrated narrowly on the priestly story. This has resulted in an oversimplification of faith as she has found it in churches she has been a part of.

Gerry found most interesting the suggestion that Jesus was a subversive. He reported that he was "shocked by the used of this term to describe Jesus." He was not necessarily offended by the label, but clearly the concept of Jesus as one who went against the cultural "grain" was an anomaly to him. My guess is that Gerry would see Jesus as going against the religious grain, as per Jesus' encounters with the religious authorities, perhaps not seeing that culture and religion are merged in this setting. This sets up a modern person to draw the conclusion that there is nothing left to subvert, and therefore that this image of Jesus has less relevance than it did then. Gerry's surprise at the suggestion that Jesus was a subversive demonstrates something of the distance between the pulpit and pew which can be found within any congregation. For me, the suggestion that Jesus was a subversive is a basic assumption.

Prior to reading the book, I had asked each of the four readers to write a paragraph describing their understanding of Jesus. Gerry's first sentence reads "Jesus was born, lived, died and was resurrected so that I and other believers in Jesus might have a means of forgiveness for our sins." This statement seems to match Borg's "priestly" understanding of Jesus. Not surprisingly, of all four readers, Gerry was the most critical of Borg. He found much in the book upsetting, particularly some basic assumptions of faith that were challenged by Borg in what Gerry called "an overt dissection of Jesus."

Denise found Borg's argument that Jesus did not see himself as the Messiah to be the most significant in the book. She felt challenged to rethink scripture's representation of Jesus and that of her imagination, in which Jesus is the ultimate in self-assurance and perhaps even overzealous in proclaiming his identity as savior. Jesus frequently defers to God throughout the Gospel accounts, and Denise appreciated Borg's emphasis on this reality as equally central.

In the group's conversation about this part of the book, Mike commented, "Today, who would believe a guy walking around saying 'I am the Son of God'?—Nobody!" He agreed with Borg that this is not how Jesus would have presented himself.

Denise found the book to be disturbing to her faith, not in the sense that she disagreed with Borg, but that she sees the Jesus Borg presents as much harder to follow than the Jesus she has seen through the eyes of her church affiliation. She expressed a concern that after reading Borg it is hard to trust the church's presentation of Jesus. This experience prompts her to consider distancing herself from the institutional church.

Mike found one particular paragraph in Borg's description of the limitations of the priestly image of Jesus to be the most significant in the book. The fact that Borg makes this statement from within the church is a surprise to Mike, but a relief to discover that there is a place for such critique among people of faith. Borg is here reacting to

limitations of the “priestly” understanding of Jesus, that “the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin that makes God’s forgiveness possible (p.128).”

Moreover, this story is very hard to believe. The notion that God’s only son came to this planet to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that God could not forgive us without that having happened, and that we are saved by believing this story, is simply incredible. Taken metaphorically, this story can be very powerful. But taken literally, it is a profound obstacle to accepting the Christian message (p.131).

Mike listens to sermons as a skeptic, as one who finds many reasonable alternatives to faith as it has been communicated to him. He sees a conflict between the church’s Jesus, who seems more interested in perpetuating an institution and the biblical Jesus who was a challenger of the system, and Borg’s acknowledgement of this may be a real factor in Mike’s ability to stay linked to the church.

Mike also commented that Borg’s explanation of the purity system of first-century Judaism was extremely helpful and completely new information. He mentioned the Southern Baptist Convention’s boycott of Walt Disney for offering benefits to partners of employees in same-sex relationships as an example of the church promoting a purity system that to his mind Jesus would attempt to overturn today.

On the first page, Borg relates that his book is addressed particularly to those “Christians , especially in mainline churches [for whom] there came a time when their childhood image of Jesus no longer made a great deal of sense,” and who have not found a “persuasive alternative” with which to replace it. Borg clearly knows well the audience he wished to reach. In this group that read the book, the person who most fit this description was the most gratified by reading it, while the person who was the most settled in his beliefs about Jesus found the book to be the least helpful.

Finally, some closing comments on the process I used for this review. I can see that this model of reading with a group with an eye toward preaching has great possibilities for enriching preaching. It gives the preacher more access to the impact certain ideas may have on the faith of others, not to mention whether or not they are understood in the first place. In other words, this model gets us preachers out of our own little worlds. I also see this model as a means to help a segment of the congregation come to terms with some issues and ideas in ways that are less threatening, because there is opportunity for feedback and dialogue.¹ It could help me find more effective ways to reach those whose faith understandings are distinct from mine, and who are tempted to tune me out on Sunday mornings. It is a way to keep the process of preaching open, connected with its hearers and receptive to all partners in the conversation.

Note

¹ For exploring other options for getting more congregational involvement and dialogue to take place around preaching, I also recommend *The Roundtable Pulpit*, by John S. McClure (Abingdon, 1995), which lays out a model for involving small groups of members in sermon preparation.



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