



**Sermons from St. Marks  
United Church of Christ  
New Albany, Indiana**



**Jesus as the Fulfillment of God**

**Acts 13:13-33**

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Today's Scripture passage is long and complex. Chances are very good that when you want to be inspired by reading the Bible, this text is not one that you will generally choose. Paul is speaking to the Israelites and he goes through a chronological history of Judaism and connects that history with Jesus and in his chronology he portrays Jesus as the fulfillment of God.

Often, when I preach, I like to find a detail in the narrative and expand on it. A word, a line, a theme---which ever jumps out at me is what I use to begin. In this case what jumps out is not a word, not a line, not a theme, but the whole passage. This is sort of a 'big picture' kind of thing.

Paul's chronology here is a reminder of something we often miss about the Bible.

Often, when we approach the Bible we approach a verse, or a paragraph, or a chapter, or a book. We sometimes forget to step back and look at the entire Bible and see what God's Word is providing for us.

The Bible, God's Word to us, is a chronology of God's relationship to people. It is not a history book, per se, telling us events; instead it speaks to us about people's relationship to God in the midst of events.

Like most great, deep relationships, the relationship of God to people is complex. God does not prove to be an 'easy God.' In the Old Testament people are often perplexed that the God of Israel is the one true God and that their God is so much more powerful than the ones of the pagans. Yet, they lament, time and time again that they, God's chosen people, keep losing all the wars and keep ending up either as captives, in exile, or wandering through the desert.

They don't understand it and God doesn't give them a whole lot of answers.

In the New Testament we see victory coming from a savage execution of the Messiah on a cross.

God does not prove to be an easy God. I find it somewhat funny because God's difficulty seems to demonstrate the validity of God. No one would ever invent a God who has such a difficult

relationship with His people; and a people who consistently do not understand their God. Jacob is named *Israel* by God after they wrestle. We Worship the God of Israel----and the one Israel is the Hebrew for, ‘one who wrestles with God.’

The Bible, in essence, speaks of a long faith journey of a people. It reminds us that our lives are often long faith journeys----a lifelong struggle in our relationship to God.

I’ve been reflecting on life of late. In preparing my daughter Michelle to go away to college I kept telling her and recognizing that she was beginning a new chapter in her life. Same lecture that I gave to Danielle when she went away to college.

Michelle was the second and last child and when we were driving away it hit me like a ton of bricks. Our youngest child was leaving home and life was changing and not only was Michelle beginning a new chapter in her life, but for us, the page had turned and we were beginning a new chapter in our lives.

Sometimes these new chapters are welcomed. We grow up and leave home. We fall in love and commit ourselves for life to another. We have children. We move. We have careers. Lots of new chapters that we choose and we welcome. The chapters don’t always turn out how we expect them to, but we choose these chapters and welcome them.

But there are other times the chapters turn that are not welcomed.

Janet and I celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary and I find it painful to look at our wedding album. It’s not because it wasn’t a happy day and it isn’t because I don’t like being married. When I look at the pictures on those pages, however, it breaks my heart looking at so many loved ones who are no longer with us. Grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, people who were special and precious and deeply loved are no longer with us. Each loss turned a chapter.

Often the painful moments, the hardships of life, turn chapters and they are not welcomed chapter changes.

And here is what happens. As we get older, as we reflect on these stories of our life and we begin to reflect on how our faith in God got us through. And, not unlike the stories told and retold in the Bible, we tell our stories of our relationship to God.

I find a couple of things that give me great comfort.

One is a sense of tradition and history. We tell stories of family from generation to generation to assure that each generation is connected to previous generations.

Recently we have begun doing Creeds again during Worship. We use the Statement of Faith from the United Church of Christ and because it is our’s and we use the Statement of Faith from the

United Church of Canada because of it's richness and it's beauty.

But we use the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed as well. The Apostles Creed began to be used consistently from the 5th century onward, but remnants of it date back to the year 700. The Nicene Creed very much came from the 5th century as well.

These creeds may not sound exciting to us but they tell a story of our faith. They speak to us and others to what we believe about God. They also connect us from generation to generation. They retell the story.

I often watch people's facial expressions when we use the words holy catholic church. It's like, "Hey wait a minute, Manzo is trying to make us Catholic!!!"

I'm not. I didn't write the creeds and they are not professions of faith to the Roman Catholic Church, but the holy catholic church which is totally different. From the time of the Reformation the word 'catholic' with a small 'c' is used to refer to the belief that all Christians are part of one Church, regardless of denominational divisions. It has Greek roots which define the word as 'general' or 'universal.'

When I was growing up I viewed the words 'communion of saints' as a bunch of people with halos in church receiving Holy Communion.

It doesn't mean that either. The word communion is derived from the word 'community' and the communion of saints reminds us that we are part of many generations of Christians.

I find great comfort in this common connection with others from generation to generation. It reminds me that Christians are a family connected by generation to generation.

The second thing that actually inspires me is that there is so much about Jesus that is a magnificent paradox.

I love paradoxes and imponderables. I'm always in search of those kinds of lists.

I recently came across this set of imponderable questions:

When an agnostic dies, does he go to the "great perhaps"?  
Why is the time of day with the slowest traffic called rush hour?

Do you think Houdini ever locked his keys in his car?  
Can atheists get insurance for acts of God?  
If the #2 pencil is the most popular, why is it still #2?  
If practice makes perfect, and nobody's perfect, why practice?

Why is there always one in every crowd?  
If all the world is a stage, where does the audience sit?  
Is it possible to have deja vu and amnesia at the same time?  
How do you know when it's time to tune your bagpipes?

Fun and silly. But Jesus also has an incredible imponderable paradoxical streak. If you take the time to sit down and read the gospels from start to finish, Jesus does raises questions.

Jesus was perfect and without sin. That is a significant and foundational belief for all Christians. Yet the Gospels tell us that Jesus deliberately and consistently broke Jewish Law. He didn't break the 10 Commandments which would have been sinful, but he seemed to delight in breaking the little Laws they had dreamed up.

Secondly, Jesus is the perfect example of love. No one in human history has ever been a more perfect example of being loving. Yet, Jesus was often incredibly ornery to the people around him and was often downright hostile to the Scribes and the Pharisees.

And ultimately the great paradoxes in his teachings such as we must be poor in order to be rich and that we must die in order to find life.

Several years ago I saw two cars within a half hour of each other with competing bumper stickers. One said, "Jesus is a Liberal." The other said, "Jesus is a Conservative."

I actually have followed up on those two statements and I found that in both instances the people making the claims were creating Jesus in the image that they wanted Jesus to be and not embracing Jesus as Jesus really is. Jesus proves not to be an easy God to figure out.

Which brings us right back to where we started. We see Jesus as the fulfillment of God because he is the fulfillment of God. Jesus is mysterious and yet knowable, teaches simple truths that bring us to complexity.

The passage we read today might never prove to be anyone's favorite but it is a magnificent reminder of both the proximity and the magnificence of our God, a God who has been God to so many throughout the ages.