God is vast. I fervently believe that the Holy Mystery we call God is beyond human understanding. How can we even begin to know what God is like?

One way we can begin to know what God is like is by knowing what Jesus is like.

It is not a stretch to think of Jesus as a truly amazing person. He seems to have been way ahead of his time in his ability to relate to and respect women and people from different cultures. He seems to have shown a depth of compassion and wisdom that we find only in the most evolved human beings. It is no wonder that surveys of Americans consistently show that a very large majority of Americans greatly admire Jesus – including Americans who are not Christian and even Americans who have negative impressions of Christianity.

But for me, Jesus Christ is so very much more than an exemplary human being.

This sermon isn’t going to answer every question about Jesus or about what it means to share the faith of Jesus Christ or have faith in Jesus Christ. I’m actually going to do a sermon series on Jesus in January. And that won’t answer all the questions either, but it will allow for a fuller exploration. Based on the brainstorm session we did in August, people have lots of questions about how to understand Jesus, or what it means to believe in Jesus. So we’ll look at that more fully in January.

One of the things that came up in our sermon topic brainstorm was many variations on this question: “Do we have to believe x y or z to be Christian? Different people fill in that x y or z with different beliefs they have heard, so you can fill in the blank for yourself. And the answer is no, you don’t have to believe any particular thing in order to be a part of this church or in order to identify as Christian. This church strives for an openness to various beliefs, and that is even in our DNA as United Methodists. So no – you do not have to believe any particular thing in order to be a Christian, or a United Methodist, or a member of this church.

But even though we are not bound by that kind of rules, if you see yourself as a Christian I would strongly encourage you to know what that means to you. And this means knowing who Jesus Christ is to you, knowing what Jesus Christ means to you. Because the name Christian comes from Christ.

Being able to articulate who Jesus Christ is to you or what Jesus Christ means to you is not always easy. I hope that for some of you this sermon might offer some tools or a framework that is helpful. Or maybe the sermons in January will.

In a sermon a couple of months ago I described Jesus Christ as a “revelation of God.” What I mean when I say that Jesus Christ is a revelation of God is that I believe when we look at the life
and ministry and teachings of Jesus; when we look at the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are seeing a picture that shows us God’s own self. I believe that Jesus is like a window that allows us glimpses of God’s own nature and actions.

I myself have travelled a journey before arriving at my current way of understanding of Jesus. I grew up hearing a lot about God, and not so much about Jesus. I have most always found it easy to have a sense of God’s presence, God’s spirit in my life. It took me longer, and came later in my life, to have a sense of what to do with this Jesus character. So I’ve done a lot of searching to answer for myself the question of why I am Christian, and not just generically spiritual or religious.

I wear glasses. I can see without my glasses, sort of. But I see much better with them on. The lenses in my glasses take what is blurry and make it clear. They make it possible for me to see what is all around me.

I definitely believe I would have a sense of God’s presence even if I did not have any knowledge of Jesus Christ. God wants to be known by us, and God provides many ways for humans to know God, many paths. But in my life, the lens of Jesus Christ plays a unique role in helping me see God.

This is the difference between seeing Jesus as an amazing, exemplary person worthy of following, and seeing Jesus Christ as a revelation of God. It’s not just that a really great guy named Jesus did a bunch of great stuff – though all of that is true. More than that, I believe that seeing what Jesus did and said helps us see God’s own essential nature. I believe that when I read the biblical stories that teach me about Jesus, these stories are teaching me about God. Jesus shows us not only what it looks like to be an exceptional human being; Jesus reveals to us God’s own nature.

One thing that comes out over and over and over and over again in the stories of Jesus is love. Love and its close cousin, compassion. Jesus loved his disciples. He loved the rich young man who came to him to ask how he should live. Jesus looked at the crowds who gathered around him and had compassion for them. Jesus taught us to love our neighbor, and then defined neighbor in a radically inclusive way, and then went a step farther to say we should love our enemy. Today’s scripture reading from Luke is just one place we see this. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and then tells us to be merciful, just as God is merciful. But that word merciful would better be translated as “compassionate,” according to a number of biblical scholars. Be compassionate, Jesus tells us, just as God is compassionate. And some of Jesus’ last words to his disciples were to tell them to go out and love the world – that just as he had loved them, they should love one another.

All of this tells me not only about Jesus, but about God’s own self. God is love. God’s essential nature is love. God loves us, loves the whole world. God is compassionate toward God’s creatures – toward us. And God’s will for us is that we love, and that we have compassion for others.
Jesus offered his followers a particular vision of life: a life lived fully, even extravagantly. In John’s gospel Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Abundantly. And more than anything else, Jesus offers us life that is characterized by hope. We hosted a showing of the film “The Cooler Bandits” here last week – a film exploring the injustices of the criminal justice system, among other things. You may have seen the slogan on the posters for the film: “poor choices don’t have to be final choices.” I think Jesus himself could have said that. Jesus defies the conventional wisdom that says there are dead-ends in life. I don’t know how you look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ – whether you see it as bodily or spiritual, as literal or metaphorical. But no matter how you look at it, the image of resurrection is profoundly hopeful.

And again: to me, the most important thing about the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not about what happened to Jesus. To me, the most important thing about the resurrection is that it tells us with striking clarity that God is a God of new life. God is a God of hope. God is a God who defies supposed dead-ends. God’s essential nature is to be life-giving, to offer hope in the face of our hopelessness. How do I know this about God? Because this is what we see in the biblical accounts of Jesus. And when I look through the lens of Jesus, I catch glimpses of God.

Jesus cared about justice. We heard a little piece from the sermon on the mount this morning in our scripture reading from Matthew. When Jesus preached that sermon, he communicated his particular care for the poor, the hungry, and the peacemakers. When Jesus spoke in public for the first time, in the temple, he read from the book of Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he said, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives … to let the oppressed go free.” Then Jesus said, “today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus said his own mission was to make a difference for the poor, for those held captive, for those who are oppressed. And because I look at God through this Jesus-lens I am convinced that God’s own deep concern is for the poor, the captive, and the oppressed. It isn’t just a guy named Jesus who cares about undoing oppression and bringing about justice. This is God’s own concern. God is a God of justice.

Before you know it we will be re-telling the story of Jesus being born in a barn in Bethlehem. And this familiar story doesn’t only tell us about the beginning of Jesus’ life. It tells us something about God. This story challenges the idea that God is always only Spirit. And it absolutely defies the idea that God exists in some far-away place called heaven. John’s gospel says, “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” So Jesus was a flesh-and-blood human being who lived in a particular period in history. But more than that, seeing Jesus Christ as a revelation of God – as a lens through which we see God – tells me that God enters in to the concrete reality of our lives over and over again. It tells me that God holds a deep concern not only for spiritual matters, but for bodily matters – like hunger and shelter and violence. An embodied God is concerned with the realities that impact our bodily lives.

I believe that Jesus’ story is God’s story – and the story of God’s own purpose for us.

It is a story about the hungry being fed, the stranger being welcomed, the naked being clothed, the sick being cared for,
the prisoner being visited.
It is a story about table fellowship that includes everyone.
It is a story where people on the margins of society are invited into the center.
And most of all, it is a story that has no end, a story where death inevitably yields to new life,
where hope wins over despair.

To say that Jesus Christ is a revelation of God is to say that Jesus’ story is not just something
wonderful that happened at one time, a long time ago. We are saying that this story is our story –
the story of all of us who call ourselves Christian. It is the story of who we are, who we are
called to be, and the story of the abundant life that is available to us.

This sermon doesn’t begin to answer all the questions we might have about Jesus Christ. But the
framework I have shared with you is a framework that is absolutely essential to my own faith. I
hope it might be a helpful perspective for some of you, for your faith. May we all find our hearts
and souls stirred by the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen.