

# *Is Jesus the Only Way?*

## *John 14:1-10*

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In the fall of 2001, I was trying to choose a seminary. Only one month had passed since September 11<sup>th</sup>, and you may remember that at that time, it was hard for anybody to talk about the state of the world, or about God, or about anything ultimate without referring to that event. I will never forget one dramatic moment in my seminary search process. At one of the schools the seminary president came to address us, the prospective students, at the end of our visit. He said a lot about how Christian ministers should be trained for the new world that now faced us. The new, dangerous world. As this seminary president talked, the anger and heat in his voice seemed to grow with words like *Islam* and *Muslims* and *evil*. Finally he reached his crescendo: "It comes down to this: if *our* God is God, then *they're* in trouble. If their God is God, then we're *all* in trouble!"

I didn't end up going to that school, but that provocative statement stayed with me, at least partly because it pointed to a theological question with which I struggled. Entering seminary, I confessed Jesus as my Lord and Savior. But did I have to believe that Jesus is the *only* Lord and Savior, the *only way*, the only path to God for anyone and everyone?

I found no end of fascinating books by systematic theologians and others delving into this question, which many point to as the most important cutting edge of Christian theology today. But it was in New York City, and actually in the congregation of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, that I learned how much bigger this question is than systematic theology or geopolitics. It's personal. Gut-wrenching, even. For many of our grandparents, and certainly our great-grandparents, people of other faiths were mostly the stuff of *National Geographic*, or the newspaper, or in the next-door neighbors' vacation slides from a trip to some exotic place like India. But not us. Here in the city of New York at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the people in our lives who do *not* call Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior might outnumber the people who *do*. Muslims and Jews and Hindus and atheists and Buddhists and Sikhs are people next to us on the subway. More than that, they are kids at school with our kids. More than that, they are our friends, our boss, our coworkers, our roommate, our closest friends. Even more than that, they are our family. The Jewish man marrying our daughter or our sister. Or the person we are married to. Or our son, who has just announced he's decided to be Buddhist. It's one thing to politely regard our Sikh taxi driver and benevolently say to ourselves, "Well, isn't that nice. To each his own!" It's quite another to look into the eyes of the person we love most and wonder, "Is it okay that we don't believe the same thing about Jesus?"

Let's just get something out in the open. I'm going to guess that nearly all of

us have suspected at some point that the Christian way is not the only way. In fact, maybe you're pretty sure you believe that Jesus is *not* the only way to get to God, to reach something Holy. But if most of us were to sit down and describe what we believe Scripture tells us, we feel obligated to say that people from other religious traditions are lost, wrong, *not* saved, even condemned to hellfire.

And which words from the Bible tell us this? What gets quoted first and foremost in this argument about Christianity being the single and superior path? "I am *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life," said Jesus. "No one comes to the Father except through me." And there it is. The line in the sand. The phrase that some Christians hold up like a trophy in the winner's circle, while other Christians try to hide it like an embarrassing family secret. Talk to anybody who has left the church, or most any person under the age of 30, and this perception that to be a Christian means you have to claim that non-Christians are wrong or damned. It is a very serious stumbling block and often the number one deal-breaker. But still the words sit there, staring at us from the page: "I am *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life," said Jesus. "No one comes to the Father except through me."

Theologian John Thatamanil writes that when it comes to John 14, "liberal Christians avoid it like the bird flu, and conservative Christians preach nothing else," but "strangely and ironically, both parties agree about what the verse means."<sup>1</sup> And we're wrong. Way wrong.

It's kind of like this. Imagine that two thousand years from now, some culture beyond ours finds the text from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, or maybe pieces of the speech. And let's say these "future people" don't apply much contextual information to understanding it. It gets translated and retranslated into whatever language people are speaking two thousand years from now. They might conclude that King's speech is about how to dream at night, and they might use the speech to make conclusions about dream analysis and how people of the past thought about their own dreams. Well, of course, this would be silly and wrong! I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that we modern Christians have done the same thing to this passage from John.

Here's the context. Jesus' disciples are shaken up. What we hear Jesus saying in chapter 14 is really part one of a Farewell Speech. The disciples, who have truly banked everything, their entire lives, on Jesus being the one, have just been told that someone among them will betray them, and that Jesus will be going away. "Excuse me? Going away? Jesus, we don't *have* any place to *go* if you leave us. Remember, we left our homes and our families and our synagogues; you are what we've got! What do you mean you're leaving us? Where are you going? And why *now*?"

And so we heard Jesus responding in that first verse, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Don't worry. You know where I'm going." And Thomas, dear Thomas, says pretty clearly, "What are you talking about? No, we don't 'know where you're going'....How are we going to know the way to find you?" And Jesus just looks at Thomas. "Really? Really Thomas? This is me you're talking about! You're not going to lose me. Thomas, I'm not only the *place* where you're going, I'm the *way* to get there." But Philip anxiously continues, "Lord, just *show* us God. That's all we need. That'll make us feel better." "Come on, Philip," Jesus seems to say. "How can you say that? I've been here, walking with you, talking with you, in the flesh. How else do I need to say this! I am *all* of that! I am the route and the destination, I *am*

God, I *am* the life you're looking for!" Jesus' words are meant as gentle reassurance about the terrifying things that await him and all the disciples. This passage is an answer to the question: "Jesus, are you leaving us? What's happening?"

But of course, the question that Christians and non-Christians pose to this text is, "Jesus, what about people of other faiths? Who will be saved, and who will not?" In the conversations of today, we hardly ask what this text really means. We act as if the meaning of Jesus' words has already been decided. Thatamanil writes, "I'm willing to bet good money that Jesus did not have the Buddha, Confucius, or Muhammed in mind when he made this statement!"<sup>2</sup>

In this passage, Jesus is reassuring us. He is also beckoning us. Gesturing towards a path, a choice we can choose. Choice. If there is a word that characterizes what is unique about the age in which we're all living, maybe it's choice. We're choking on choice. We have more channels and choices than any human beings *ever*. And the choices available to you when you pull up a web browser, well...if someone has ever thought it or said it or taken a picture of it, you can probably choose to get your eyes on it too. You can choose to learn and know just about anything, if you are literate and have the time. As Americans, choice is seen as an intrinsic good, a part of freedom. Choice is even a part of our identity, what and who we choose to be, to say, to buy. Whether you are in the voting booth or in the ice cream section of the freezer aisle or looking at the search engine on your screen, you have a lot of choices.

Jesus is beckoning, asking us to come down His path. So if we're going to choose to do that, or to decide again to follow Him, then shouldn't we research the other options? Think of the time we spend researching colleges or the kind of vacuum to buy. Surely we should give some kind of attention to choosing our faith? But religion is not like any other choice in our lives. We cannot get objective when it comes to religion. A faith path, whether it is Christian or Buddhist or Animist, is much more than its guiding principles, much more than its history or even the people who claim it as their faith, or anything that can be contained on a Wikipedia page. To really know a religious tradition is to live with it, study it, eat it, swallow it, and let it move through your system for years. To learn a faith is to learn a language and then speak with other people in that new language about how they have found the holy, about the history of how they've done it and the stories they carry around. And that's just the first few steps. Knowing whether or not a religious tradition has something of holiness in it is not necessarily something we can quickly or easily assess.

We can't peer out of God's eyes and survey all religions equally. I think this is hard, because with just about everything else in our lives, we can stand back, look at all the options, and pick what fits us best or what seems most true. Now, it's true, we *can* evaluate some things about religions. In the first Epistle of John, there are some wise words: "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." I bet you'll join me in saying that David Koresh does not get to play on the same holy court as Mother Teresa...or even Mahatma Gandhi. We all can list things done or beliefs held by other faith traditions that we just cannot imagine being close to what we know about God. I do not believe that all faiths teach the same thing, or that it's all relative, or even that faith is one big mountain with lots of different paths leading up its face. 'Seems to me we're looking at entirely different mountains.

But still...it is a big fat modern-day delusion to think that it's all about *us* doing the choosing. You can't read the Bible without tripping all over a major message that screams to us in flashing neon: God speaks of Israel as a chosen people – once you were no people, now you are God's people. You will be my people, and I will be your God. Just one chapter later in this gospel of John, Jesus says, "You do not choose me. I choose you."

It's a lot less like us picking Christianity as a preference, like a brand of cereal off the grocery shelf, and much more like us being born to parents we did not choose. God reaches out to us through the very ordinary and very particular configurations into which we were born. God reaches us through the context of our lives, through languages we know, through the people around us. God has reached you and me through the Logos, the Word, with words we can understand, because as long as we are walking around in these limited human bodies, we cannot and will not know anything beyond our own limited perspective. I know God through the story of Christmas and Easter, through coloring pictures of Noah's Ark, and saying grace at my family's dinner table, and later, through youth group mission trips. And I am called to walk in the way of Jesus. I believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Visualize right now one or two of the non-Christian people in your life whom you know best. For me, it's the four young moms, all Jewish, whom I met last year in prenatal yoga. We all had our first babies within a few weeks of each other, and we all have clung to each other like velcro during this first year of raising our babies. We've laughed and cried and shared fears and secrets with each other. I know and love and trust these four women who happen to be Jewish. I daresay they are *just* as good for the world as I am, loving their families, finding ways to make the world better, enjoying and worshipping God in the language God happens to have come to them. You know people like this too. And when they go to synagogue, they hear God calling *them* Chosen people. But, so many others have heard themselves as chosen: the Mayans, the Aztecs, the Sumerians, and the Assyrians. Heck, followers of Jim Jones thought they were chosen by God too. What about them? In the *Bhagava-Gita* of Hinduism, Lord Krishna says something awfully familiar to his followers: "Whatever path men travel is my path, no matter where they walk, it leads to me."<sup>3</sup>

Whom did God really choose? All of us? Some of us? Who's right? At some point, we have to let God be God and admit that perhaps we are not to know the answer to that question on this side of life. Saint Augustine had some good wisdom on this: he said that we should do our best to seek answers to difficult questions. Having done that, he said we should "rest patiently in unknowing." For me, at the end of the day, these questions are *not* what haunt me at night. As one theologian put it, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me, but the parts I *do* understand, like loving God with my whole heart and loving my neighbor as myself,"<sup>4</sup> and my enemies! That's plenty hard, all on its own.

As a world community of so many diverse faiths, we've got our hands full with problems we all care about. Whether you are Muslim or Jewish or agnostic or Christian, it matters whether or not our planet is going to be livable a few centuries or decades from now. No matter who or what you worship. It should matter whether or not we are one button push away from nuclear destruction, it should matter that 11 million children die annually of preventable disease, and it should matter that the gap between the richest and the poorest is gaping. No matter how we point to God, we

*all* need better laws and better leaders; we need more worshipping and less warring. As the faiths of the world, we had best be collaborating on our common problems rather than competing for theological conquest. Our common causes are far more important than trying to prove superior the unproveable truths of our faiths *or* trying to water down the particularities of our faith so that we find some ultimate common denominator between the world religions.

No, we are called to *walk* the path of Jesus Christ, not stand at the head of the trail, looking at our map and making guesses about how it is actually pretty identical to three other paths. To be chosen for the path of Jesus Christ is to not choose other paths. And the sacred, ancient directions on our path say...what? They say we are to love, first and foremost. To love. I just cannot see how it is loving to bring others to Christ by coercion, by beating them over the head with the threat of damnation. We are not keepers of the trail. Here are more wise words from Thatamanil that ring true to me: "Walking the way of Jesus Christ means walking the way of Jesus Christ, not circumscribing it. We are called to follow the Way, not police it!"<sup>5</sup>

My daughter Abby is *this* close to taking her first step. So are those four other babies from my prenatal yoga group, all born to Jewish families. Her wobbly little steps are taken at the beginning of what I hope and believe is the unique path of Jesus Christ. But I believe in a God who loves, fiercely loves, those other four wobbly babies, and their mothers, as nervous as I am about what this world holds for our sweet babes. I believe Abby can learn something good and true and holy and unique from her sisters and brothers, something about God. Jesus said, "In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places." Thanks be to God.

#### Notes

1 John J. Thataminil, "No One Comes to the Father but by Me?" sermon preached May 7, 2006, at St. Augustine's Episcopal Chapel at Vanderbilt, Nashville, TN.

2 Ibid.

3 Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 212.

4 Dan Clendenin, "Is Christianity a Sublime Bigotry? 10 Reflections on the Gospel and World Religions," April 14, 2008, *Journey with Jesus* blog, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080414JJ.shtml#20080414JJfn2>

5 Thatamanil