

Why Christ?¹

Let your imagination run wild for a minute. We walk out of church today into the sunshine of a perfect fall day. Big puffy clouds are on dramatic display. Suddenly, your eye is drawn to something you've never seen in clouds. It is as if, emerging from the huge cumulus clouds, are gigantic puffy, cloudy block letters. As you, together with others, stare at the sky, the cloud letters become more distinct. They're suddenly legible! Just as you are able to read the message, sun beams break out from the clouds and fill the sky. The letters read, "I am." The something new emerges from the clouds. After several seconds the shape is unmistakable. It is a spectacular cross. A yell goes up: "Someone grab a camera!" But before the camera arrives the clouds have cleared.

The little group that has been staring at the sky agrees, this is huge. Someone pulls out a cell phone to call the pastor. No, the minister, as it turns out hasn't actually seen the clouds, but he has heard from two others. Before he hands up, the minister promises to look into the phenomenon and preach about next Sunday. Wait a minute, it has to be in two weeks because the next Sunday is stewardship Sunday,. First things first.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on November 15, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

As it turns out the phenomenon in the sky has been witnessed around the world. On Monday, the television talk shows are abuzz with blurry photos and prominent clergy on camera for interviews. Surprisingly, the clergy excitement on what seems like indisputable proof of God's existence, is a bit muted. On Tuesday, dozens of new photos of interesting cloud formations show up on the talk shows and 24 hour news outlets. Most are of the Virgin Mary. One depicts the Last Supper, curiously organized just as was Leonardo Di Vinci's. One impressive cloud photo looks exactly like Abraham Lincoln's head. Another was eerily like Ross Perot, but experts are pretty sure it had been doctored on Photoshop

By Wednesday, business earnings reports, which certify that the recession is indeed ending dominate the news. The only reference to the cloud miracle is a political story about how the opposition party is criticizing the President for what they label as a flippant, insensitive, and belated response that amounts to a slap in the face to believers of all kinds. By Thursday, the incident is pretty well forgotten. The pastor quietly schedules another topic for the Sunday he'd promised to address the cloud issue. Sunday's church attendance is actually down because Georgia is playing at home that weekend.

We've been thinking over the last couple of Sundays about why we believe in God and why we're Christians. By your chuckling at my fanciful story, I take it that you agree with me that even proof wouldn't rock our worlds and lift our hearts and cause us to throw ourselves into discipleship.

Do you realize that none of the disciples in the New Testament followed Jesus on the basis of their witnessing a miracle by Jesus? Disciples followed and then witnessed miracles. But no one followed because they had proof—proof that he was God, proof that his teachings were reliable.

So then, why do we believe in Jesus, why follow? The answer is exquisitely simple. Because he believes in us. How did Jesus put it? You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit.

Consider the simple story that we read today. Jesus walks along the shoreline and invites the disciples to follow. Their response is amazing. In the blink of an eye fishermen completely drop their jobs and village life and take up incredible lives of discipleship which rocked the world. Why did they do it? Did they see a miracle. No. Was there something compelling about Jesus? I don't think so. The Bible certainly says nothing about any personal magnetism. The only thing we have is the sheer fact that he asked them. Invited

them. Commanded them. And they responded. Wow! The power of invitation.

How about us? Why do we believe? I submit that you and I choose Jesus Christ because we sense he has already chosen us.

I'm thinking about the little half miracles that leave me thinking that he really wants me. I think my conscious journey as a Christian began on a beach in Fort Lauderdale, Florida when I was 17. Thousands of college students were on the beach. Some students from intervarsity Christian Fellowship were there to share their faith with fellow students. They prayed that God would guide them to the right person, walked for a mile past thousands of students, and chose me. The same thing happened the next day. There is probably some explanation for the fact that different student evangelists picked me out of thousands. I was younger. I was by myself. But being singled out struck me that there was more than chance.

A novelist put it this way. "As an author, I'm always looking for a plot. I'm a Christian because I have come to believe that my life has a plot. It's going somewhere. God's had is guiding it somewhere and it has meaning. God cares about my life."

What does all of this have to do with you and me? We follow Jesus not because we manage to prove that there was a man

named Jesus of Nazareth back in 33 a.d. You and I become disciples because we sense that he's calling us by name, that he wants us. It's personal. And somewhere along the way we acknowledge that God is pursuing us and we sort of stop avoiding or ignoring him and say, "Alright, Lord. You're real. I know you're whispering my name, so I give in. What do you want me to do now?"

Do you remember the story of Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus? He's thrown down to the ground and light flashes around Paul. What does Paul say? "Who are you, Lord?" It sounds to me like Paul knows exactly who it is. Maybe God had been working with Paul for some time before he knocked him down into the sand of the desert floor.

Is any of this familiar or do you see yourself the object of God's patient attention, ever pursuing you, ever drawing you to himself? Do you sense that your life has a plot? That God is trying to get your attention through coincidences and friends and experiences, and little half miracles that are just curious enough not to ignore. If that's you, my invitation is to dare give in and say, "Okay, Lord. I'll stop trying to get away. I hear you. I want to be yours forever. What do I do now?"