Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermon series titled, “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the gospel of Luke.

The text we’re studying today is ▶ Luke 9:7-9. From this text, we are going to be addressing arguably the most important question in all of Christianity. It is a question that people have been struggling to answer ever since Jesus showed up 2,000 years ago.

The people in our text are a case in point. The year is AD 31. And they are struggling with the question.

The question concerns the identity of Jesus.

Who is he?

Our text begins in ▶ Luke 9:7, where it says,

> ESV Luke 9:7 Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, . . .

A tetrarch is a governor or ruler. Herod Antipas was appointed by the Roman government to be the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, where both John the Baptist and Jesus concentrated their ministries. Herod ruled from 4 BC to AD 39.[1] So, he was in charge during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

When ▶ verse 7 says Herod “heard about all that was happening,” it is most likely a reference not only to the miracles Jesus had performed, but also to the miracles now being performed by his twelve apostles whom

[1] Hoehner, Harold W., “Herod, Herodian Family,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 964–72.

Jesus had just sent out with power and authority to cast out demons and heal diseases.

The rest of ▶ verse 7 and all of verse 8 explain Herod's response.

> ESV Luke 9:7 . . . and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen.

The original Greek word translated "perplexed" is a strong word. It means to be utterly at a loss, to be thoroughly perplexed, to be bewildered.[2] The bewilderment concerns the identity of Jesus.

Specifically, there was speculation swirling about Jesus being one of several dead Jewish prophets who had been resurrected. Some said Jesus was ▶ John the Baptist. Others said Jesus was Elijah. Still others identified Jesus with one of the other Jewish prophets of old.

At this point, you may wonder why a Roman ruler like Herod would concern himself at all with such speculation about Jewish prophets. There are at least two reasons.

First, Herod was Jewish. He was not ethnically Jewish, but Jewish by conversion. According to an ancient historian named Josephus, Herod's ancestors were Edomites who had been conquered by Israel and forced to convert to Judaism.[3] So, Herod's religious family background is Jewish. That would explain his interest.

Another reason Herod would be concerned is that he is the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. So, naturally talk of Jesus being John the Baptist raised from the dead would have gotten his attention.

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[2] Friberg.

[3] Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews,* 13.9.1.

▶ Verse 9 says,

> ESV Luke 9:9 Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

And there is our question: Who is this?

Herod can’t figure out who Jesus is. He knows that Jesus is someone extraordinary, but beyond that, he is perplexed. The speculation represented in the text is that Jesus is remarkable, but not God himself.

This text sets up the specific question I want to address in this sermon: ▶ Is Jesus God?

To believe that Jesus is God is difficult. Peter Kreeft is professor of philosophy at Boston College and The King’s College. He says,

> *Christians tend to forget how difficult it is to believe the doctrine that Christ is divine. It is, quite literally, the most astonishing idea that any mind has ever conceived in all of history. This man, this carpenter’s son who was born from a woman like any other man, who had to learn to speak and walk, who got tired and hungry, who suffered pain and weakness and death as a crucified criminal, is God, the infinitely perfect, eternal, transcendent Spirit who created the universe!*
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> *. . . I have great sympathy for the non-Christian who understands what the doctrine means and shakes his head in amazement, wondering how two billion otherwise sane and rational people, many of them among the most intelligent people in the world, can believe such a thing.*

. . . If it is not ultimate truth, it is ultimate lunacy.[4]

What is the importance of Jesus being God's Son? Why all the fuss?

Well, if Jesus is not God, then Christianity is a sham and we're wasting our time this morning.

If Jesus is not God, then Christianity loses the central, defining idea that distinguishes it from all other religions.

If Jesus is not God, then the New Testament loses its authority because it is predicated on the deity of Christ. And, if the New Testament loses its authority, then Moon Valley is not a part of God's team—the church—mobilized by God to save the world. We are a book club. And our gatherings to study the "Good Book" are nothing more than pooled ignorance.

If Jesus is not God, then he is not really my Lord or yours. Worse yet, we've been duped into thinking he is, either by Jesus himself, or by his followers. Either way, we Christians would not then be the salt and light of the earth; we would be a living legacy of deceit and spiritual abuse.

So, the deity of Jesus is not a minor point of doctrine. It is the crucial foundation of Christianity.

So, what data do we have concerning the claim that Jesus is God? Where is the evidence?

This sermon is an incomplete attempt to make the case for the deity of Christ in the limited time we have this morning.

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[4] Kreeft, Peter, "Why I Believe Jesus Is the Son of God," in *Why I Am a Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 226.

Let's consider the explicit claims of Jesus recorded for us in the Bible.

After Jesus began his public ministry, a number of Jewish leaders approached to question him about Abraham, the father of Judaism, who lived and died hundreds of years before Jesus was born. As recorded in ▶ John 8:53, they asked Jesus incredulously,

> ESV John 8:53 "Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"

Jesus responds to the question in ▶ verses 56 through 58, saying,

> ESV John 8:56 "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." 57 So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" 58 Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

Jesus' response is freighted with information about who he is.

I want you to see that Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of a promise God made to Abraham many years before. As recorded in Genesis 12:3, God promised Abraham,

> ESV Genesis 12:3 ". . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

This promise foreshadows a Messiah, a Savior who would come from his family line, bringing salvation to all people. We can't be sure how much of this Abraham understood, but Jesus says, ▶ "Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." Abraham was delighted at the thought of the coming blessing.

Genealogically, Jesus qualifies as this promised Savior. Matthew 1:1 is careful to introduce the New Testament by tracing the lineage of Jesus back through David to Abraham. So, Jesus did indeed come through Abraham.

Moreover, when Jesus says "Abraham rejoiced that he would see ▶ ***my*** day," he is saying that he himself ***is*** the promised Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham.

Also, I want you to see that Jesus alludes to his pre-existence. When Jesus claims to know how Abraham was feeling hundreds of years earlier, Jesus is essentially claiming to have existed long before he was born in Bethlehem.

The Jews who were listening found this idea to be preposterous because Abraham died hundreds of years before Jesus was born. That's why, in ▶ verse 57, they question in disbelief, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?"

Jesus affirms the truth of his pre-existence in ▶ verse 58, saying,

> ESV John 8:58 . . . "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."

Jesus could truthfully say that he existed before Abraham was born because Jesus is God, and God has existed forever. It's just that about 2,000 years ago, Jesus came down as God to become a man, and he now exists as the God-man—fully God and fully man.

Additionally, I want you to see that Jesus affirmed his equality with God in another way. You may have noticed that it appears that Jesus has a hard time conjugating verbs properly. He says, "before Abraham was, ▶ I am." Shouldn't he have said, "I was"? Why does he say, "I am"?

Well, his Jewish listeners would have been thoroughly familiar with what God had said to their ancestor, Moses, over a thousand years earlier. You may recall that God appeared to Moses in a burning bush, telling Moses to lead the liberation of his people, the Israelites, from bondage in Egypt. Moses asked, "When the people of Israel ask me what your name is, what do I say?"

In Exodus 3:14, God says his name is *Yahweh*, which means "I am." So, from that moment, the God of Israel was known as "I am."

So, in saying, "I am" in a grammatically conspicuous way, Jesus was claiming to be God—the God who spoke to Moses.

The Jews who heard what Jesus said knew full well that Jesus was claiming to be God. They understood it perfectly because they then picked up stones to try to kill Jesus for blaspheming.

The skeptic may say, "Well, maybe the Jews were clear about what Jesus was claiming, but I'm not so clear. Is there something Jesus said that is a little more direct?"

On another occasion, the Jews were again questioning Jesus. ▶ John 10:24 records,

> ESV John 10:24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

Jesus responds, beginning in ▶ verse 25.

> ESV John 10:25 Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me,”

Again, Jesus gives us a good deal of information about himself in his response.

First, Jesus says that the watershed issue is not whether or not he has claimed to be God, the Christ, the Messiah. In reality, he has kept nobody in suspense about that issue. Jesus repeatedly claimed to be God. The real issue is whether or not you believe it. Jesus says, ▶ “I told you, and you do not believe.”

Second, Jesus alludes to the miracles he has performed as evidence of his deity. He says, ▶ “The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me.” Indeed, the Bible records that Jesus performed miracles that testify to his authenticity as our God and Savior.

- He healed people.
- He raised people from the dead.
- He cast out demons.
- He fed thousands with only a little bread and a few fish.
- And he walked on water.

In effect, Jesus is saying, “The miracles alone should tell you that I am God.”

Third, in ▶ John 10:30, as part of his response to the question about his identity, Jesus again makes a very direct claim to be God. He says,

> ESV John 10:30 “I and the Father are one.”

Jesus is making statement that is tied to the central creed and daily prayer of ancient Jewish life. The creed is in ▶ Deuteronomy 6:4, where it says,

> ESV Deuteronomy 6:4 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

This saying is known as *the Shema*. It was the foundational declaration of Jewish monotheism as distinct from the polytheism of surrounding pagan cultures. It was recited twice daily, in morning and evening prayers.

Put yourself in the sandals of the Jewish audience. You are in the Jewish temple. You have recited the morning *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD *is one*.”

Then Jesus says, “I and the Father *are one*.”

The Jewish hearers recognized this as a claim to deity because they once again tried to stone Jesus to death for such blasphemy.

The skeptic may say, “Well, maybe in saying ‘I and the Father are one,’ Jesus just meant that he and God were real tight. Is there anything even more direct?”

On yet another occasion, the Jews brought Jesus before the Jewish high priest on charges of blasphemy in claiming to be God. The high priest questioned Jesus, as recorded in ▶ Mark 14:61-62.

> ESV Mark 14:61 . . . Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” 62 And Jesus said, “I am . . .”

It is clear. Jesus explicitly claimed to be the Christ, the Son of God himself.

To say that Jesus is the Son of God or the "Son of the Blessed," is not to say that Jesus was the offspring of the Father, or that Jesus was created by God. This is not what the Bible teaches.

Some argue that Jesus was created by God, citing Colossians 1:15, which describes Jesus as "the firstborn of all creation." But the term "firstborn" is not a statement about who or when Jesus was created; rather, it is title of Jesus's rank and supremacy relative to creation.[5]

To be the Son of God is to be divine. It means that Jesus is God himself.

The Bible teaches that this one true God is revealed to us in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is called the Trinity.

Each person of the Trinity is equal in essence and fully God. But each person of the Trinity has a different role. God is one God in three persons.

The Trinity is hard to understand fully, and even harder to explain clearly. The three-in-one idea is illustrated, though imperfectly, by a man who happens to be a father, a son, and a husband at the same time. He is one man, but he functions in three different roles depending on which relationship is in view. The Trinity is something like that.

The Jewish high priest to whom Jesus said, "I am," had no clue about the Trinity. But he clearly understood that Jesus was claiming to be God, as indicated by his response in ▶ Mark 14:63-64.

> ESV Mark 14:63 And the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further witnesses do we need? 64 You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?" And they all condemned him as deserving death.

[5] In Psalm 89:27, David was also called the "firstborn" of kings, not because he was the first king ever born, but because he was the greatest earthly king.

Aside of these explicit statements by Jesus and the miracles mentioned, there is a host of other corroborating evidence for the deity of Christ.[6]

- Jesus changed people's names (John 1:42). Jews believed only God could do that.
- Jesus claimed to be sinless (John 8:46).
- He forgave sins (Mark 2:5-12; Luke 24:45-47).
- He accepted the title, "My Lord and my God" and he accepted worship (John 20:28).
- He promised to send the Holy Spirit (John 14:25-26; 16:7-15).
- He offered people eternal life (John 3:16; 5:39-40).
- He claimed the authority to supersede the Mosaic Law (Matthew 5:21-48; 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-12).
- He foretold the future (Matthew 24; Luke 24:1-7; John 6:64).
- He said he will return at the end of time to judge the world (Matthew 25:31-33).
- He rose from the dead, confirming his deity (Romans 1:3-4).
- And his closest followers affirm his deity. For example, the apostle Paul says clearly in Colossians 2:9,

> ESV Colossians 2:9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

So, the biblical data overwhelmingly support the proposition that Jesus is God. And this creates a dilemma.

You see, the vast majority of non-Christians and also many professing Christians think Jesus was just a good man. Just a wise teacher. Just a virtuous person. Just a human model of character.

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[6] Kreeft, Peter, "Why I Believe Jesus Is the Son of God," in *Why I Am a Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 228.

But that is exactly what he cannot be based on the data. If Jesus is not God, then there is nothing good about him. If he is not God, he is either a delusional lunatic, or a blasphemous con man, and these aren't good alternatives. Jesus claimed to be God. If he is not God, how can he be good?

That's the dilemma. If he's not God, he's not good. In fact, that's ▶ the big idea of this message. If Jesus is not God, he is not good.

Our history and our hearts tell us that Jesus was a righteous, moral, humble, believable person. But he makes the most unbelievable claim: "I am God."

You can't divorce the claim from the person. If you reject the claim, you must reject the person. If you accept the person, you must accept the claim. That's the dilemma. It he's not God, he's not good.

It's easy to look down our noses at the Jewish priests who condemned Jesus to die, but at least they considered the data, and they recognized the dilemma. The data left them with only two choices. They reasoned, either Jesus is God, in which case we must worship him, or Jesus is a blasphemer, in which case we must take him out. Along these lines, scholar, Peter Kreeft makes this provocative statement:

> *Those who crucified Christ for blasphemy were closer to faith than modern humanists who praise what he said about others, about how they should live, but ignore what he said about himself.*[7]

The data leave us only two basic options: Either Jesus is God, or he is not a good man. But our gut tells us that Jesus is indeed a good man. If Jesus

[7] Kreeft, Peter, "Why I Believe Jesus Is the Son of God," in *Why I Am a Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 226.

is indeed a good person, then the data constrain us to conclude that Jesus is God.

But what if we don't want to go where the data lead us? What if we want to acknowledge what most people seem to know—that Jesus was good—but at the same time, we stubbornly refuse to surrender ourselves to the notion that Jesus is God? We'd like him to be good, but not God. What then? The data do not permit this conclusion, so what do we do?

We must doctor the data. If we don't like where the data take us, we must change the data. Let me mention two modern ways people have tried to deal with the dilemma by doctoring the data.

First, many people acknowledge that Jesus is God. But, they say, so are we. Jesus was simply articulating a universal truth: We are all God, or parts of God, or expressions of God. We all divine and Jesus simply encouraged us to recognize it. This is a pantheistic, mystical idea.

There are at least two problems with doctoring the data in this way.[8]

First, Jesus was a Jew, who affirmed the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament to be the inspired Word of God. And those Scriptures are clearly monotheistic, not pantheistic. That is, they teach that there is only one true God who is transcendent and holy; he is above all else and separate from all else.

One common belief among pantheists is that there is no such thing as sin or evil—that it's a misconception. While that may be a convenient way to sidestep personal responsibility, the teachings of Jesus flatly contradict this notion. He told a disabled man and an adulterous woman to "Sin no more" (John 5:14; 8:11). He didn't say, "You do you."

[8] Ibid, 229-231.

Second, many pantheists have hailed Jesus as a great guru, but that is exactly what Jesus cannot be. If Jesus was really a pantheist, he must have been a lousy teacher. If Jesus taught pantheism, his own hand-picked disciples didn't get it.

There is not a shred of evidence that the disciples understood themselves to be God. This idea is completely antithetical to everything that the New Testament teaches, and the New Testament was written by the first followers of Jesus—guys who saw him, knew him, watched him, walked with him, and sat under his teaching. If Jesus was a pantheist, he failed to teach his closest followers. And it is dismissive of history and the apostles for a pantheist to assert, "I finally get what Jesus meant" when the apostolic writers of the New Testament clearly did not.

Another way to doctor the biblical data is to say that Jesus existed, that he was a good man, but that, after his death, his followers cooked up all the talk about Jesus being God. They say Jesus never really claimed to be God. They say the writers of the New Testament just made up that stuff to make Jesus bigger than he really was. The writers put words in Jesus' mouth. All the miracles and all the claims to be God are just not true.

In responding to this idea, let's consider a timeline of events.

There is very good evidence that Jesus was crucified in AD 33.[9]

Within a very short period of time—a matter of weeks—the apostles began preaching the good news that Jesus rose from the dead. The majority of what we know about Jesus comes from the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in the New Testament. Let's consider when they were written.[10]

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[9] House, Wayne, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, 129, reflecting Hoehner's chronology.
[10] Ibid, 16-17.

The gospel of Mark, the first gospel to be written, was penned in the 50s or 60s. Mark was a disciple of the apostle Peter, and Mark records Peter's firsthand accounts of what he saw and heard.

The gospel of Luke was written in AD 60. Luke wrote his gospel based on interviewing those who were with Jesus.

The gospel of Matthew was written in the 60s. Matthew was himself an eyewitness to the things Jesus said and did.

The gospel of John, the last to be written, was penned in the 80s or 90s. John was also an eyewitness to the things Jesus said and did.

Some scholars quibble about these dates, but there is broad consensus that the gospels were written well within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries.[11]

You say, "So, what? Who cares when this stuff happened?"

Well, if the apostles preached and the gospels were written well within the lifetime of those who knew Jesus firsthand, then there would be plenty of people around to refute the claim that Jesus is God, and that he performed miracles.

For example, someone living to 70 years of age could have seen and heard Jesus in person, and then would have had the opportunity to read any of the gospels.

So, when John spoke and wrote of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, people would have been around to say, "That's baloney, I knew Lazarus. I knew his sisters, Mary and Martha. Lazarus died, and he stayed dead."

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[11] Kreeft, Peter, "Why I Believe Jesus Is the Son of God," in *Why I Am a Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 232.

Consider a modern example. What if I were to tell you that Elvis Presley is the king?

Jeff Dover, one of our elders who is an Elvis fan, would probably say, "Yes, I know. He's the king of rock and roll."

And I say, "No, I mean the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Elvis is God. Elvis was always saying that he was God. Now, we know it's true because he performed great miracles like raising Duke Ellington from the dead. And Elvis himself is risen from the dead. So, let's bow down and worship Elvis."

And Jeff would probably say, "Bob, Elvis died in 1977. And he's still dead. Elvis never said he was God. And Duke Ellington died in 1974, and he's still dead. Elvis is not God. Are you nuts?"

And I say, "Don't be cruel."

And then Jeff Dover, along with the other elders would quietly put me out to pasture because my claims completely contradict contemporary, firsthand witnesses. Nobody would expect my patently bogus testimony—assertions that could be so easily discredited—to stand up as the basis for some new Elvis religion that would change the world in ways that no religion ever has.

In the same way, it is unreasonable to expect that Christianity's explosive, world-changing growth could be explained on the basis of the bogus testimony of some gospel writers who could have been so easily discredited by their contemporaries, many of whom would have been strongly motivated to do so.

So, you see, doctoring the data does not deliver us from the dilemma. If Jesus is not God, he is not good.

But what if Jesus is God? What if it's true? Just think what that means.

If Jesus is really God, that means . . .

- the God who created the universe,
- the One who gives every star a name,
- the One who has no beginning and no end,
- the One who adorns every flower, every bird, every leaf,
- the One who holds all things together,
- the One who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
- the One who has no lack,
- the One for whom all the nations are like a drop in the bucket,
- the One who feeds every living thing,
- the One who is all-powerful and all-knowing and everywhere present,
- the One who knit you in your mother's womb and knows your words before you speak them,

. . . this God emptied himself, taking the form of a servant in the person of Jesus Christ, and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. All for you and me. Because he'd rather die than live without us.

Let that sink in. Again.

Let's pray.

> ESV Psalm 8:3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

Thank you, God, that you came in the person of Jesus Christ for us. Guard us from taking this glorious truth for granted. Amen.