

What do Lutherans believe with regard to...

Who was Jesus?

As a person Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish rabbi who lived and died in Israel under Roman rule in a province the Romans called Palestine. He spent his adult life in ministry with a close circle of disciples, traveling around the region, teaching about God and spreading a message of God's love and hope through repentance and the forgiveness of sins. He miraculously healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised the dead. These were "signs" of his being God's son, or as he came to be called, "Messiah", a Jewish title which also can be understood as "Savior".

He initially gathered many followers who were passionate about his teachings. As his following grew, some of the religious leaders became more and more distrustful and angry with him, particularly about his claims to be the Son of God. He was eventually turned over to the Roman government by Judas, one of his own disciples, and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate sentenced him to execution. He died by being nailed to a cross, a common form of capital punishment in those days, in Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews in about the year 30 AD.

But on the third day after his crucifixion, the day Christians call Easter, Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared among his followers. He continued to teach them, spreading the Good News (also called "the gospel"), sharing the story of his life and resurrection with people on earth for forty days before returning to heaven. The story of his resurrection, as well as his teachings, are recorded by eyewitnesses of these things in the New Testament of the Bible.

Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ validates all that he did and taught, Christians are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live our lives in the same manner he did. Through acts of love and mercy, worship and witness, we share God's boundless love for the world. As members of the ELCA, we share with all Christians a worldwide community of faith. Through Christ, we are united with other Christians and we recognize a wide fellowship of churches. As Lutheran Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ lives among us today by the power of God's Spirit, present when the Good News is preached and the sacraments are administered.

The New Testament is the only document that gives us a reliable picture of Jesus of Nazareth, who he is and what he means for humankind. The Gospel according to St. Mark, the earliest of the recorded Gospels, (about 70 A.D.) says, "*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'*" (Mark 1:9-11).

St. Paul, the earliest of the New Testament writers, says,

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross"

(Colossians 1:15-20).

The Gospel of John describes Jesus as "the Word", saying; "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*" (John 1:1-5).

Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten, writes: "*(Jesus) is clearly depicted as the Messiah of Israel, God's only Son, the Lord of creation, the Savior of all humanity. The New Testament abounds with titles that identify the uniqueness of Jesus. It is simply not possible to ... subtract these titles from the picture of the Man and have any real Jesus at all. We have no picture of Jesus as merely Jesus, to interpret as we please. The only Jesus we know is Jesus as the Christ, Son of God, Logos, Lord, Savior — all titles of highest possible honor, putting him in the place which Israel had reserved for God alone, so much so that ultimately the church's "trinitarian" formula (God as three persons...Father, Son and Holy Spirit)" becomes the only sound way to speak about the identity and meaning of Jesus. If we rightly read the New Testament, we learn that Jesus is not a son of God, but the only Son, not a savior, but the only Savior, not a Lord, but the Lord of lords, etc.*" Dr. Braaten goes on to say; "*If Jesus is the Lord and Savior, he is the universal Lord and Savior, not merely my personal Lord and Savior.*"

(Carl Braaten, *The Universal Meaning of Jesus Christ*, Lutheran Church in America, *Partners Magazine*, December, 1980)