

Your Own Personal Jesus
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Hello, I'm Diane Page. And my topic today is . . . Jesus.

OK, I know that's a little weird. Jesus was Jewish, true, but he's pretty much associated with Christianity. And this is a Jewish congregation. This is a Jewish holiday. And me, I'm an atheist. Or maybe I'm an agnostic. But WE DON'T DO LABELS here at Beth Chai. Do we? -- Am I right?

Anyway, back to Jesus. So, when you're looking at the Bible – and I have to pause here with a disclaimer – I was raised Catholic. We never looked at the Bible when I was coming up. It's your Protestants who know their Bible verses. We didn't have to do that, the Pope told us

everything we needed to know. Or the parish priest told us. Told us who to vote for, too. One stop shopping. Very convenient.

Anyway, back to the Bible. Don't be looking in the Torah, this is the New Testament I'm talking about. But, if you look under all the worshipful . . . divine . . . miraculous . . . fluff, and despite how old it is, and whoever wrote it, and whatever their motivations might have been, one thing still comes through pretty clear. Jesus was a PAIN IN THE NECK JEW WHO SPOKE TRUTH TO POWER AND MADE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.

So you can imagine what the authorities of the time were thinking, right? "That Jesus, such a PAIN IN THE NECK. He's got a crowd of 5,000 people now, hanging on his

every word. He's feeding them loaves and fishes. Their bellies are full. They're not subservient any more. We've got a problem."

I've been thinking about Jesus a long time. He was a big deal in my family. My Aunt Mary had the Irish Holy Trinity displayed on the wall right above the bar in the basement – Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and John F. Kennedy.

Did you know there was nun in my family? Not unusual with large Catholic families back in the day for one of the kids to become a priest or nun. Sister Antoinette was a Maryknoll missionary in the Philippines during World War II. She and other Maryknoll nuns were interned in Los Baños, a notorious civilian Japanese prisoner of war camp, from 1942 until 1945, when they were liberated by U.S. troops. The prisoners were threatened with execution, and

they were starving. Disease and death were everywhere.

The nuns picked the bugs out of their rice rations, fed the bugs to chickens smuggled to them through the fences by the local villagers, took the eggs laid by the chickens, and fed them to the sickest prisoners. So they were all fasting, so to speak, on an involuntary basis.

Can't you imagine the Japanese camp officer -- subsequently executed for war crimes, by the way -- saying "Those nuns. Such a PAIN IN THE NECK. They're praying. They started a camp school. Their priest is building an altar. They're holding worship services. And where did all these chickens come from?"

Now, I've read Sister Antoinette's letters. She was a simple Pennsylvania farm girl. Yet she was a teacher, a nurse, and even a burial detail organizer under conditions more

horrible than we can imagine. She did not fear death. She was on a mission from God. My very own auntie, that old lady who gave me all those plastic statues of Saint this and Saint that, was a PAIN IN THE NECK NUN WHO SPOKE TRUTH TO POWER AND MADE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.

By the way, did you ever wonder what would happen if Jesus came back today? In addition to being to being a little farblonget (What? They're still killing each other, they're still hating on each other, and they're still coveting each other's stuff. Bummer.), he'd be in just as much trouble as before. There he'd be, right up front in Ferguson, Missouri, with his hands in the air and teargas canisters bouncing off his little thorny head. And the authorities would be saying, "Who IS that Jesus guy? Such a PAIN IN THE NECK.

And he seems doesn't seem to be affected by our wooden bullets. You hit him right in the chest and . . . he . . . just . . . keeps . . . coming.”

One of my late husband's favorite philosopher's, Woody Guthrie, he called it.

“This song was written in New York City

Of rich man, preacher, and slave

If Jesus was to preach what He preached in Galilee,

They would lay Jesus Christ in His grave.”

So let's talk for a minute about Jesus dying on the cross, which has always been a confusing topic for me and, let's face it, makes Christianity look like some big whacko death trip. Supposedly, Jesus took on everyone's sins, from your basic lying, cheating, and stealing to your major smiting activities, and sort of as a surrogate, sacrificed himself and

died to save us from the consequences (hellfire, brimstone, what have you). Now this never made sense to me, even as a little Catholic school child. Not that I was stupid enough to actually say this to Sister Mary Agnes, my second grade teacher, who would smite ME with her ruler, you betcha.

We all know that real reason Jesus died. He died because he was a PAIN IN THE NECK JEW WHO SPOKE TRUTH TO POWER AND MADE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. Am I right?

So, let's think about this some more. To me, the death on the cross thing is a symbol, a symbol of atonement. Of forgiving yourself and others, of having your debts written off, of having your burdens lifted, the muck and dust and mud and dregs of the past. Remind you of anything? Yom Kippur maybe?

And the resurrection thing. And on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, it says right there in Matthew 28. He's all new, his garments are white and brilliant. He is beginning again. It's a new day. The tomb is empty. The cold empty tomb of the past. Remind you of anything? It's a new year. Happy Rosh Hashannah. Shana Tovah, my friends.

These themes, they're all the same. We seek release from our sins, our regrets, our rash actions and commitments and habits of the past. We want to begin again, to prepare ourselves to begin again with clear eyes and an open heart and the courage to change, both ourselves and the world around us.

Now, as for my aunt, the nun, she was here [point], and God was there [point]. Her inspiration was to meet God and be with God.

But we're humanists. Our inspiration is from our hearts, in here. You are . . . your own . . . personal . . . Jesus. As in, a Jew who does her utmost to heal the world.

Did Jesus succeed? Was he the Messiah, or is the Messiah yet to come? For me, it doesn't matter. It's not linear. It's not timebound. The Messiah is present. The Messiah has been, is and always will be. The Messiah is not an outside agent; the messianic dwells in me; the trick is manifesting it.

By the way, my daughter tells me the original song "Your Own Personal Jesus" was by Depeche Mode; Marilyn Manson just did a cover. Who knew? If you have no idea what I'm talking about here, don't worry. It's not essential to the story.

Let's activate our own . . . personal . . . Jesus. Let him get to work. And if your own personal Jesus isn't up to it, in a particular situation, the last time I looked at the Beth Chai directory, there are a couple hundred other Jesuses right here who can help you out. Let me explain.

After my husband, Fred, died from complications of ALS this past December, I was reading condolence cards. There were a lot of them. Thank you.

But there were, not one, not two, but three, that really struck me, because they said almost the exact same thing in almost the exact same words. And what they said was this: "When I see an injustice, and I'm hesitant to speak up, I think about Fred and what Fred would do, and it gives me courage . . . " OR "Fred inspired me to take action."

Whoa. W-W-F-D. What would Fred do? And I suddenly realized -- Fred was a PAIN IN THE NECK JEW WHO SPOKE TRUTH TO POWER AND MADE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. Yeah.

Ok, sometimes he was just a pain in the neck. Granted. But sometimes, sometimes, he was his own . . . personal . . .

Jesus. A Jew healing the world.

Look around. Inspiration is everywhere. Now, you don't have to do anything that would lead to crucifixion, by the way. You don't have to undermine an entire authority structure. You don't have to start revolution. You can start small. You could even just . . . change yourself a little.

Are you ready to throttle your teenager? W-W-A-D. What would Art, our Rabbi, do? Art is a wise counselor and a

listener who respects where people are at, and meets them there. “I see that you are upset. Let’s talk.”

Are you struggling in the midst of chaos? It’s loud, a cacophony, you’re running here and there with your hair on fire. You’re accomplishing nothing. W-W-M-D. What would Michelle do? Actually, we’ve got two Michelle’s in our congregation, or one Michelle and one Chelle, who would assign tasks, make the people who get the tasks feel privileged and honored to do them, straighten out the chaos, and get the job done. And they would hold your hand and smile while doing it.

Is your inexperienced co-worker slowing you down and getting in your way, and it’s so frustrating? W-W-R-D. What would Roni, our education director do? Roni is a

teacher. She finds joy in helping others learn and empowering them. How could she inspire you?

And many more. I could go on and on, but no worries, I won't. Yes, I'm wrapping up.

So, to conclude, inspired by the High Holidays, their meaning, and inspired by our fellow humanists, you get out there. You be a PAIN IN THE TUCKUS JEW WHO SPEAKS TRUTH TO POWER AND MAKES THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. Or, you can speak quietly and work gently, if that's more your style. But be your own . . . personal . . . Jesus. A Jew who heals the world . Get out there. Reach out and touch faith. DO IT!

Thank you.