

Who Do You Say I Am

by Tree Riesener

You've gathered in church to wait for Jesus. Unarguable signs have let you know this is the day. This is the day of the second coming. This is Judgment Day.

It was a no-brainer to wait at the church. There was more discussion over whether it should be a potluck but in the end everybody agreed a collection of simple dishes appropriate for Lent would be okay and a blessing to the elderly and fragile.

Many of you have gone across the street to that expensive little shop that sells home-cooked frozen gourmet meals, more expensive than cooking but so convenient.

You've all spent quite a bit of time deciding what to wear, trying to steer the line between too casual, which could be interpreted as disrespectful, and too formal, which could lead a suddenly silent Jesus to add up and look askance at your well-fitting suit and silk turtleneck.

There are examples of both approaches present. Most seem to have chosen the middle way, stuff you could pick up at the Gap or J. Crew--natural fabrics, cotton, wool, linen--but nothing ostentatious, the sort of clothing you might wear for a Parent-Teacher Association meeting.

You've left your gold jewelry at home. Except for watches. Somehow you want to keep track of time.

You're sitting in a circle of chairs left over from the meeting on Sunday about whether or not the church's present predilection to elect gay bishops and even women was going to hasten the end of the world. That was before the announcement about the end coming, so some thought it had and others said it was just coincidence.

On the whole, those present seem to have borrowed their attitudes and voice tones from old funerals. There is surreptitious

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/tree-riesener/who-do-you-say-i-am--11>»

Copyright © 2010 Tree Riesener. All rights reserved.

glancing at the watches as the morning goes on. Occasionally someone answers a cell phone but talks in a low, well-bred voice.

Everybody is longing for a cup of coffee but nobody likes to give in and actually go start the dripping. What if Jesus walked in when you had the steaming cup in your hand, tantalizing your nostrils, but before you'd actually brought the cup to your lips? What if such addiction to worldliness counted against you? What if then you were sent over with the goats and had to put the cup down carefully on the table near the door, having gone to the trouble of making coffee but never having had your last sip?

These and other small issues are on everyone's mind.

The group has started the waiting with several nice prayers but then silence ensues. You are all wondering if there will there be a sign, something like a mass ringing of bells, a clap of thunder, or brazen and echoing angel voices to get things started. Might Gabriel actually appear as the advance man to give you time for a last bathroom call, time to uncross your legs, straighten ties, clasp hands demurely in your laps?

This is doomed not to be.

You all start at the sound of the door opening and closing. There is some banging and cursing and the sounds of someone or something falling. The same thought comes to everyone's mind—all those stacked-up contributions for the thrift shop. Then someone limps and scrapes down the hall. You've just relaxed when that someone comes in the door. This person is bizarre enough that you know something is up. You can't believe it but in your heart, you know Jesus has arrived.

Short guy, not more than five feet one or two, made worse by his bent and twisted appearance because of the hunched back. Long straggly beard. What hair is left is scruffy and full of dandruff you can see across the room. Squinting at you.

God forgive you, you hope somehow you can be judged from across the room because you can smell the stench already. The room is full of it. He's probably never taken a bath in his life and

he's obviously drunk so much alcohol for so long that he's as full of alcohol fumes as Rappacini's daughter was full of poison.

Didn't it say, somewhere in Luke, that people said Jesus ate and drank too much, talked about how he preferred old wine to new? Did he have a substance abuse problem even then? Who would have known it was this bad?

Still, he is the Lord. No getting around that, and even his Father said "My ways are not your ways." Who are we to judge? Better not judge. You've got to remember—judge not lest ye be judged. Judge not, judge not, judge not. Maybe he can't read minds. Even if he picks up what you're thinking, he'll know you're struggling against it and that's got to count.

His robe may have been white once but now it's full of years of dirt and food stains. You can see the long, jagged, dirty fingernails clutching his crutch and you realize in the midst of winter he's barefoot and you're horribly aware of his horny, yellow toenails. Oh, yes, his nose is running and he wipes it on the back of his hand.

He gingerly eases himself into a seat near the door, under the big crucifix, and lays his crutch down beside it. The chair is near a radiator, which magnifies the smell. Silence ensues. You wonder what to do. Is this a test?

He smiles at you and you realize the smile full of missing and rotten teeth is meant to be sweet and reassuring.

"I guess you've all been waiting for some time. Sorry to be so late. The sidewalks haven't been plowed or even salted yet. Fell down twice. By the way, I think you're in violation of the fire code with all that junk in the hall."

Everybody starts to get up and head toward the door.

"No, no, don't bother to move it now. The time is short."

Alarming. All of you, who have been half out of your seats to run out and show the proper spirit by moving the boxes sink back and try to look holy, dismiss the thought of coffee from your minds. You feel like second graders who are all going to be punished because the person who put a tack on teacher's chair won't confess.

Are you supposed to pretend you don't notice what he looks like? Would this show you don't judge people on externals?

Are you supposed to excuse yourself and run down to the restroom, rend your garments, dig some dirt out of the flowerpots and smear yourself up a little, dip your head under the faucet to get the mousse out and appear flat and stringy, go back into the room barefoot to show solidarity with the suffering peoples of the world?

Are you supposed to say, diffidently, um, excuse me, I know how busy you've been and probably haven't had time to freshen up. We have a shower in the basement and a supply of clothes from the thrift shop for homeless guests who are in need of them? Would you like someone to show you the way down and where the deoderant and mouthwash are kept? We'll just wait here until you're ready to come back.

Would this show hospitality to strangers, say your hearts are in the right place in spite of the natural fabrics and gold watches?

Which is the right answer?

Increasing visual and olfactory discomfort leads Mrs. Upper, with a consciousness of her responsibility as head of the vestry, to go for the third option, addressing Jesus as Sir, and ask if he'd like to be shown the facilities. You realize with relief that someone has made a decision and you're off the hook.

When Jesus says sure, he'd like a chance to freshen up, once he's on his way downstairs, you all dash to the restrooms and scruff yourselves up a bit, pull shirttails out, yank off ties so you can meet in the middle. He'll be a bit tidier, you'll be a bit scruffier. Then you return to the room and sit down to wait. And wait. And wait.

Since things seem to have loosened up a bit, someone puts the coffee on and that fragrant homey scent, plus opening the windows for a while, regardless of the temperature, does quite a bit to freshen the room.

The waiting gets to be a strain so you're all happy when you hear him coming back. Even his stride seems to indicate the facilities offered have done him good. You whisper, *I think this is going to*

help quite a lot. I just couldn't see myself being judged by someone who smelled like that.

You all nod your heads, feeling good you've offered hot water, soap and clean clothes to God.

Then he enters the room, having availed himself of what was offered. In addition to now being clean, he has straightened up and grown a few inches, showered and shaved, seemingly been totally enamoured of the lotion and dumped it all over himself, unfortunately using the bottle of drugstore Joy instead of Brut. You would forgive him for not being informed about twenty-first-century fragrances but his total appearance is still dismaying and you wish you had the bum back.

He's chosen a nice polyester cocktail dress in lime and magenta, complemented by a sequined powder blue sweater, and some six-inch spike-heeled gold strappy sandals. I thought I told you to throw those out, someone whispers. Jesus smiles at the person and he says he's glad she didn't because now he can see over the heads of the crowd.

The beard is gone and he has inexpertly moussed his hair and fluffed it up. He's used too much and it's spiked like the Statue of Liberty. His makeup is far too bright although it's a pleasure to see his gleaming white teeth and beautifully manicured nails, done the new way with little miniature pictures on each one. He must have found the stack of fashion magazines and leafed through them.

You're not sure whether you're upset because he seems to have changed gender or because his fashion choices are so tacky.

He sits down right under the big crucifix on the wall and asks if there's any coffee left. One of the vestry rushes to get it for him, bringing the cream and sugar on a tray. He pours in so much cream that the coffee is in danger of spilling over. When he adds a few spoons of sugar, it does slop over on the floor.

"Damn," he says. "Sorry. I've just got such a sweet tooth." He starts to get up.

"I'll get some paper towels in the kitchen."

You say please to let you do it and rush off. When you return, you bring some doughnuts on a plate, left over from the meeting to talk about the Bishop.

Jesus eats the doughnuts, seemingly not noticing they're a little stale, unfortunately spilling powdered sugar that smears when he tries to brush it off his dress, drinks some coffee, then looks around and says, "Well, isn't this nice?"

Everyone nods eagerly, then silence. More silence that goes on until the normal time for lunch. Growling stomachs punctuate the silence.

Finally Jesus speaks again.

"Ummm, I don't want to rush you" (everybody sits up) "but I do have the whole world to get to, so I wonder if you've made any decisions."

More silence.

Someone finally dares to speak up.

"Decisions? What do you mean?"

"Decisions," he says somewhat impatiently, so you can glimpse the god through the tarty exterior. "Decisions. This is Judgment Day. You were told two thousand years ago that it was coming. Remember. I told you in these exact words."

Crossing his long graceful legs in their pearly pantyhose and golden sandals, Jesus runs rapidly through all the signs.

"Nation rising against nation, pestilence, famines, earthquakes, false prophets, abominations of holy places, etc. All that's well under way. To be quite honest, I don't even understand why you're here. That's partly why I was late. I spent a lot of time looking for you.

"When you saw all these signs, you were told to flee to the mountains, not stop to take anything with you, not even to go back to the house for your coat. I had to include pregnant women to be fair, but I didn't say you couldn't carry them. Them and the crippled, the old, anybody that needs a little extra accomodation.

"I've been searching all the mountains and as far as I can tell, the only people there are die-hard skiers enjoying the almost-empty

lifts. I didn't have the heart to summon them for judgment just yet so they're getting in a last few runs.

"I told you it might be in winter and here it is. I guess you didn't pay attention to any of this. You just kept working, playing, accumulating more stuff, thought your fur coats could keep you warm in *my winter!*"

Realizing he is becoming a bit strident, Jesus leans back again and takes a sip of his coffee before continuing in a voice like a college professor assigned to remedial English.

"Didn't I say to watch for my word becoming widespread? I said, and I quote, concerning this sign the Saviour says: 'And this gospel of the kingdom, shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations, and then shall the consummation come.'

Wake up and smell the coffee, folks ! It's all over cable any Sunday morning.

"Return of Enoch and Elijah? The Undead Prophets rock band, with singer Enoch and Elijah on bass? They've been having a ball but I guess you've all been listening to Barry Manilow, which won't count against you. No one can be faulted for their musical taste.

"The Great Apostasy? No one in France has been to church for years and there are only about fifty Episcopalians left in the United States, probably most of them gathered in this hall.

"Reign of the Anti-Christ? This one should have been a dead giveaway. I can tell you've all been neglecting your numerology or you would have figured out which world leader's name qualifies for the Beast 666. Look here."

Jesus walks over, hips swaying in that way you can't help in six-inch spikes, to the big tablet on an easel used in Sunday school. Selecting a bright purple marker, he draws the following.

"Let's start out by looking at the Hebrew system. Okay, here's the letter values for each letter of his first and last names. Just add up the values for gimel (3), heh (5), ayin (70), resh (200), gimel (3), heh (5), beth (2), ayin (70), shin (300) and cheth (8), and there you are. 666. You can do it other ways, too. Try using the Chaldean system

or the Pythagorean system. Same results. Just because he's out of office doesn't change anything."

You're feeling a bit overwhelmed. This wasn't how you expected Judgment Day to be. You try to explain.

"Well, of course we're glad to see you. Maybe we'll get used to you. But did you ever think, maybe you're asking too much of us. We didn't think you'd be a nasty old drunk and a slut."

Jesus looks at his outfit in surprise.

"Well, to be honest, there seem to be so many old drunks around on the streets, I thought that was a model you liked. These are not exactly to my taste but since this is what you supplied, I of course thought they were your best things you were offering to clothe the naked, as per my instructions. I didn't want to hurt your feelings, especially at a time like this."

He thought for a while, jiggling one of his sandals on his toe.

"Okay, here's a thought. I was trying to appear in a form that I thought you had indicated for me. After all, that's what Judgment Day is all about. I've been judging you for a long time and now it's your turn. What kind of a Jesus have you shaped for yourselves all this time I've been away? I left it all in your hands.

"Let's make it simple. Just this. Who do you say I am? You tell me, I'll try to be whatever you say, and we'll take it from there."

Hurried little consultations begin.

Well, I always pictured him as taller than usual, but not so tall as to be freaky. How about six-four. No, that's a little too much. Six-two. Hair should be a little long even if it's not the style. But we don't want him looking like a sixties wannabee. How about just a little long, sort of like that new age singer Yanni? That's good. Light brown with golden highlights, can we agree on that? A little wavy. You've got to go wavy if you go long. Otherwise you just look unkempt.

The leaders of the church are powerful and their thoughts prevail for a while. Soon a sanitized, updated version of Holman Hunt's painting stands before you, dressed in pleated Dockers and a nice soft shirt, flannel but with a tiny houndstooth check that's a little

dressy, from L.L. Bean. At the last minute, they add, not really a halo, just a hint of highlighting all around his head. He's got Boatsider moccasins on his feet and the gold strappy sandals look sort of forlorn, kicked over in a corner, one standing up and the other fallen on its side.

During Jesus' time in the downstairs bathroom, the teenage youth group has come in and been motioned to the back of the room. They missed the scruffy Jesus but giggled with joy at Jesus in drag. Being young, their thoughts don't have so much authority but they've used their cellies to text message one another and now they're all there, so making up in numbers what they might lack in age.

They don't like their parents' preppy Jesus at all so they continue to punch in their thoughts about Jesus and as each message shows up on their screens, Jesus changes accordingly.

Soon he is a five-foot eight-inch dirty blonde with a shy smile, wearing a Weed Is For Prophets T-shirt, torn jeans and rubber flip-flops, so homey that one of the Youth Group skateboards right across the room and high fives with him, totally ignoring whoever yells at him from across the room to go back to his seat how dare he and they'll have something to talk about when they get home.

After that, things go back and forth for a while. Six-feet-two but with dirty blond hair and flip-flops. Executive wingtips, five-feet-eight wearing a T-shirt. And so on. However, word has got around and the church is full. By the time the vegetarian People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals group has him in undyed cotton trousers with a drawstring and a natural linen shirt with buttons carved by Fair Trade craftspeople, with definite cocker spaniel eyes, everyone is tired and asks for a break.

During the break, you join the smokers in the vestibule. The temperature has dropped quite a bit and the wind is starting to whistle around the corners. You've kept your indignation bottled up inside and welcome the chance to vent a little.

You say this is not what you expected at all. You don't think it's quite fair. It's asking too much of you. After all that authoritarian

stuff, the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, to throw it all on your shoulders! You tell people confidentially that you don't know if you've ever mentioned it to anyone, but you tithe. After taxes of course.

Although indignation is rising, you're all still afraid of overt rebellion. You go back to the hall and take your places. Things have been continuing in your absence. Jesus is patiently waiting there, now with dreadlocks, overlong hip-hop shorts and a size quadruple-X, super-extra-large white t-shirt. He must have got tired of coffee so someone has seen to it that he has a bottle of water.

You look at him and think what a shame all this is. He was at his best when he was just a little kid. It was a lot simpler. Surrounded by all that Christmas stuff, his mom and dad nearby, shepherds and lots of animals, angels singing in the sky. All of a sudden, you think, that's who I think you are, Jesus. You're Baby Jesus. That's the Jesus we all loved best.

Immediate result. You watch the clothes falling to the floor as the figure transforms backward. Young man Jesus to teenager Jesus to Baby Jesus on the floor, cooing and gurgling. Definitely a golden glow around his head.

Tension magically seems to leave the room. You all let out a sigh of relief. This is more like it. This is a Jesus we can relate to. Everybody walks up quietly, towering over Jesus, looking down at Jesus.

Secretly, you all think it would be good if he just stayed like that, a cuddly little no-problems baby. Then, unbidden, a thought creeps in. Life was pretty nice for most people before he even came. Maybe it would have been better if he hadn't even been baby Jesus, just had never been born.

Leave it for sometime in the future, all this theology. It's hard enough just getting through life, going to work everyday, making a nice life for your family. It would be good if the Second Coming, hell, even the First Coming, was just something on the agenda for way, way in the future.

Jesus, well, as soon as you think that, Jesus down there on the floor seems to be having some breathing difficulty. As you watch, the little figure sighs, grows paler and paler, seems to curl in on himself. As you watch, he becomes ever smaller, less defined, finally a little fishlike creature, then a blob, and finally a few cells that dwindle on the floor and disappear.

You feel really scared while this is happening. You didn't mean to go that far. Have you killed Jesus? Wait, you say, but as soon as that comes out of your mouth, you forget what you were going to say next.

You all stand around blinking and looking a little dazed, stretch as if you're waking from a dream. Nobody remembers who the speaker has been and nobody wants to embarrass himself or herself by asking. Guest speakers are like that. Improving and all, but sometimes you just have to let the words flow over you and doze a little. It's been a very nice get-together, you say, and agree to do it again soon. People gather up their casseroles, wipe off the table, and stack the used plates and cups in the dishwasher.

As you go out, something seems different, empty.

That's it.

That big empty space by the door, nail on the wall. What used to hang there? Must have been up a long time—that funny cross-shaped space is darker than the rest of the paint.

You can't remember but agree it would be a nice spot for a painting or something, or else you should get the sexton to take the nail down. You hurry to gather up your things and start on the way home before darkness sets in.

Your armored vehicles are waiting outside to take you home but first you all put on body armor and strap on your sidearms, put on your breathing masks, before you leave the building. You can never tell about a breakdown. Word has it the hordes of Genghis Khan and the Storm Troopers have wiped each other out but there's always some crazy new group coming along.

Calling goodbye's, you leave the hall and step into the light of the lurid lime-green

sunset, a little laboriously sucking in filtered air from the poisonous atmosphere. It's hard even to stay upright and walk in the non-stop, whistling, icy blast of wind. The heavy black snow is coming down harder now and the wolvish things are howling in the distance.

