

A Life of Jesus

the second of a seven-part series



This is the second in a series of seven sermons that I'm preaching this Lent, trying to sketch the life of Jesus. Last week we looked at the early years of Jesus' life, and discovered how very little we really know about them, and how ordinary they appear, and that was the first benchmark of this series. We observed that Jesus was from the rural countryside in Galilee, and grew up in obscure and insignificant little towns and villages, notorious for their widespread poverty and disease, and sure enough, miserable cripples and sick people appear one after another on almost every page of the Gospels. We also noted that as a good Jew, Jesus would have regularly heard in the synagogue

the words of the prophets about a promised kingdom of God where the blind would see again, the deaf would hear, and the lame would leap for joy; where there would be justice and peace on the earth. What a wretched contrast existed between those Jewish hopes, and the realities of squalor and disease in the towns and villages around Nazareth. Jesus may well have been listening intently for the voice of God to answer his cry, and the cries of those around him, when he heard another voice, crying out in the wilderness, the voice of John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan River.

The second benchmark of this series is that Jesus began his public ministry as a follower of John the Baptist, something that, I believe, is glossed over a bit in the Gospels. It is indisputable that Jesus' public ministry started with his baptism by John. All of the Gospels either record or imply that Jesus was baptized by John himself, and that *that* was the beginning of his public life. That is where two of our Gospels begin their story. It should perhaps also be remembered that Jesus and John the Baptist were said to be cousins, and that Jesus' mother was close enough to John's mother to go to her when she became pregnant out of wedlock. It is repeatedly noted that Jesus greatly loved John the Baptist, and always spoke of him later with much affection and a high regard.

John the Baptist was a significant historical figure in Palestine at that time, better remembered in the secular accounts

of the first century than Jesus is. John was out there in the wilderness in order to separate himself from the corrupt society of his day, so that he would not become ritually defiled. Whole communities moved out into the desert to await the coming Messiah, like the one at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. In the same way John encouraged the people who came out to him to prepare for the anticipated coming of the Kingdom of God by purifying themselves, by repenting and being baptized, and by strictly keeping the Law of Moses. John's own simple garment of camel's hair and leather girdle and his diet of locusts and wild honey (Mt. 3.4; cf. Lev. 11.21-2) confirm his rigid adherence to the Levitical code. John was a holy man in his day, probably a Nazarite (Num. 6:1-21), and he attracted many followers.

Jesus though seems to have distinguished himself among those baptized by John, by putting into action John's message. For example, in the Fourth Gospel it is during Jesus' first appearance in Jerusalem after his baptism, that Jesus cleansed the Temple, overturning the tables of the moneychangers, and driving the peddlers and their animals out with a whip, demanding that they "take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a den of thieves" (Jn. 2.16). The other Gospels, interestingly enough, record this event at the end of Jesus' career, the only time that they happen to mention Jesus ever going to Jerusalem, that fateful last week of his life, and that is how the Church has celebrated it ever since. Thus Jesus'

cleansing of the Temple has usually been thought of as a provocation of the temple priests by Jesus that soon lead his arrest and crucifixion; that is certainly the way Hollywood has generally portrays it. But now I suspect that the Fourth Gospel has it right, that this event was at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, shortly after his baptism by John, not at the end. For I see this event as a prophetic acting out of John the Baptist's message, of cleansing the defiled temple and calling the people there to repentance and prayer.

In the same way, I view the severe criticisms with which Jesus lashes out against the scribes and Pharisees in the Temple, like that long series of 'woe to you' in Matthew chapter 23, such as "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Mt. 23.15) . . . You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (23.24). These harsh judgments contrast with many of Jesus' other statements, but they are not dissimilar to John's denouncement of the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to him on the banks of the Jordan, when John cried out to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?" (Lk. 3.7-9). The difference again is that Jesus actually took John's message into the Temple

courtyard, straight to the people concerned, again perhaps distinguishing himself among John's followers.

After the cleansing of the Temple, it is recorded in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus with his disciples (two of whom we know were first followers of John) returned into the land of Judea and baptized along side of the Baptist (Jn. 3.22). According to Matthew's Gospel (4.12, 17), Jesus began to preach only later after he heard that John had been arrested; and the message that he preached, according to Matthew (4.17), was the exact same one that Matthew records John had been preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (cf. 3.2). The Fourth Gospel notes, that "when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John . . . he left Judea and departed again to Galilee" (Jn. 4.1). Clearly Jesus had begun to distinguish himself and perhaps feared for his own life. "So when he came to Galilee," the Scriptures record, "the Galileans welcomed (Jesus), having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast, for they too had gone to the festival" (Jn. 4.45). Is that a reference by the crowd to the cleansing of the Temple? And is this about the time when John the Baptist, imprisoned in Herod's jail, sent some of his disciples with that most urgent of questions for Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

When Jesus heard that King Herod had actually killed John the Baptist, "he withdrew . . . to a lonely place apart." "But

when the crowds heard (that Jesus had withdrawn), they followed him . . . and he had compassion on them" (Mt. 14.13-4). According to Mark's Gospel, "they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things" (Mk. 6.34). There follows the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus seems to be clearly taking over leadership of John's followers after his death. Remember that some will later declare to Herod, that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Mk. 6.14). After this feeding of the five thousand, according to the Fourth Gospel, the people declared, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world! ---- Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him King, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (Jn. 6.14-5).

I have often wondered why Jesus fled from that crowd who would have crowned him king, who would have anointed him as the Messiah. I believe that this is a turning point in Jesus' life. And I suspect now that Jesus refused the attempts of the followers of John to crown him King, because he knew that the crowds were mistaken about him, that he was not really like John the Baptist, that he was not a fulfillment of John's prophecy.

For whether or not Jesus began as a follower of John, Jesus' message became something in the end radically different from John's. Jesus spoke less of God's judgment and vengeance, and more and more about God's mercy and forgiveness. For while John preached repentance and the wrath of God, he said nothing about

the love of God that we know of. His was a God of anger and punishment and earthly power, while Jesus preached instead about a God of love and forgiveness and spiritual power. John's was an image of an outraged deity for the people to fear, while Jesus cast an image of the God of love who comes himself to experience the sorrows of humankind. Jesus' parables and teachings are full of stories about God's great love for the common people, for the poor and forgotten and the lonely, for the sinners and tax collectors. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God" (Mt. 5.3).

Jesus' ministry may have begun out there in the wilderness as a disciple of John, but Jesus did not remain there. Perhaps the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness reflects a time of theological struggle for Jesus, a wrestling with the future direction of his ministry after his baptism by John. For the temptations which Jesus is recorded as having suffered in the wilderness boil down to pursuing an earthly salvation for the people, in return for a fullness of power on earth --- which was precisely what John was preaching about, but which according to our story, Jesus rejected.

Unlike John, Jesus did not ultimately seek to separate himself from the sinners and tax-collectors, but instead Jesus ventured in from the wilderness, ventured into the corrupt cities and villages and ate and drank with the defiled, with Pharisees and prostitutes and tax-collectors and Samaritans, and assured

them of God's love and mercy. "For those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;" he said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk. 2.17). Moreover Jesus did not seek to cast judgment or wrath upon his enemies, but to love them, and to teach his followers to love them as well. "You have heard that it is said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'" (Mt. 5.43).

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5.10). Moreover Jesus and his disciples were regularly criticized for breaking the laws of Moses, which John the Baptist had sought so hard to observe. On one occasion, after healing on the Sabbath, Jesus reminded his hearers, "that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

In the end, the message of Jesus and his ministry began to take a very different direction than that of John the Baptist, and where that road leads, we will begin to look at next week.
AMEN.