

Jesus Came from Nazareth
Mark 1:4-11
January 7, 2023

This is an amazing day for us as a church family. For the first time in 143 years, we are an independent church. We are headed in a new direction which means that we are now totally responsible for ourselves and our ministry and mission for God in this world. It feels different to me. And that is okay. I have never been the pastor of a church that wasn't Methodist and this is the thirteenth church I have pastored. That seems like a lot but nine were on circuits. I imagine that it feels different for you also, because most everyone in our church family has deep Methodist roots and things are different now. True enough we have moved on but we are not leaving Methodism totally behind. As the prophet Jeremiah asks: "Can a leopard change its spots?" (Jeremiah 13:23) And the answer is, "No." But it can change the direction it is going, which is what we have done as we try to be more obedient to God's will for us as a church family.

Jesus changed his direction in answer to the call of his Heavenly Father for his life. Since there is no record of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, after Jesus' tween years Bible scholars believe that Joseph had passed away. Jesus as the oldest son was therefore responsible for his family's well-being. Scripture tells us that he followed his father's footsteps and like Joseph was a carpenter. But at about age thirty as Luke tells us Jesus left his role as family patriarch to begin his ministry as the Messiah and savior of the world. (Luke 3:23) The time was right for him to leave. Jesus had several siblings (Matthew 13:55-56) and a younger brother perhaps James, author of the book of James, took his place in the family. Jesus became an itinerant preacher and took on the role of rabbi having reached age thirty, the accepted age for a rabbi to begin teaching and preaching. The Lord God his Father had set the stage for his ministry.

Jesus' three-year ministry took place during a 200-year span of peace and prosperity in the Roman Empire. Historians have called it Pax Romana; it was the time when the empire reached its peak of political and economic influence. It lasted from 27 B.C. to 180 A.D. For the Roman Empire this was a time of peace, order, and stability. Long distance trade boomed as the Mediterranean was cleared of pirates and tens of thousands of miles of new roads were built – much of which was paved, making it easier to travel and move troops. The improved public works also included new bridges, harbors, and aqueducts. The empire doubled in area from Great Britain to Northern Africa and it had a population of 70 million – about thirty percent of the world's people.

Jesus' ministry and the growth of the early church as recorded in the New Testament took place during a seventy-year period from 27 to 95 A.D. Christianity grew by leaps and bounds and by the year one-hundred it could be found in Rome, Spain, Gaul, North Africa, near Sicily, and Egypt and around the eastern Mediterranean, in what today is Turkey, north and west to Greece, and east toward the Caspian Sea. The growth was the result of many factors. (1) The most important was the power of the Holy Spirit – most notably at Pentecost who touched people's hearts as thousands came to a saving knowledge of Jesus and then went back home to share this new way of life with those they loved. (2) The witness of Christians who were martyred left an indelible mark on those who witnessed their faith and commitment to the Lord. A notable example in the New Testament being Saul and his witness of Stephen's martyrdom. Christ never goes where he is not welcomed and yet God is always working of the heart, seeking us before we seek him. Maxie Dunham in his book Our Journey says: "For salvation we must respond in faith to God's grace." (1) That is what Paul did even though he didn't know who it was that blinded him and spoke to him. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" and the answer came "I am Jesus ...". In those moments Paul came to faith. (3) The fact that there was a common language – Greek – helped to spread the gospel. The widespread use of Greek was the result of Alexander the Great having conquered much of the known world around 300 years before Jesus. Adapting to the Greek culture, language and methods of commerce was essential if a nation was to thrive. Because of the Greek influence, for example, the New Testament is in Greek and not Hebrew. (4) The Pax Romana, as you recall being a span of peace and prosperity, also played a role as it was relatively safe to travel. The Romans built over 250,000 miles of highways of which 50,000 were stone paved. The most famous was the Appian Way in Italy. Some of their hundreds of roads were in and around Jerusalem. Because of the vast highway system, the first disciples were more easily able to spread the good news of the gospel and start and grow new churches throughout the Roman Empire. Paul on his missionary journeys walked over 10,000 miles and sailed many more on the safe waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The time was right for the coming of Jesus and the good news of his gospel. God had for hundreds of years been preparing the way in the Mediterranean Basin.

All this started with John's faithful response to God's call on his life. Our text says that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness looking on the wild side in a camel hair coat and calling the people of Jerusalem to the Jordan River for "a baptism of repentance of the forgiveness of sins." (Mark 1:4) Many came because of the excitement and the proclamations of a prophet which had not been heard for nearly five hundred years. Many responded to John's call for repentance and were baptized. John had even

more good news and went on to tell his listeners that one was coming that was more powerful than he. One who would baptize not with water but the Holy Spirit. And Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Our last two verses of scripture read; Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11-12)

In Matthew’s account of this story John challenges Jesus, telling Jesus that he, Jesus, needs to baptize him, John, and not the other way around. Maybe John was right but Jesus wanted to be baptized by his cousin John and so he was.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus was made like us in every way and was tempted as we are but was without sin. (Hebrews 2:17, 4:15) Let us briefly try to answer two questions: The first question: Could Jesus Have Sinned? Hebrews tells us and Christians traditionally agree that Jesus was without sin but there has been a debate as to if he could or couldn’t sin. Some contend “while he experienced temptation, given his divine nature he couldn’t have sinned—just as God is unable to sin.” (2) This viewpoint stresses Jesus’ divine nature rather than his human nature and free will. With this understanding Jesus acts out of his divine nature and is therefore unable to sin.

As is almost always true with every theological question there is an opposing view. The second view stresses Jesus’ human nature and claims that he was able to sin as all of us are. And therefore, Jesus could relate to the human weakness for sinning. Hebrews 4:15 says, he was “...tempted in every way, just as we are—yet did not sin.” If Jesus had not been able to sin it seems unlikely that the writer of Hebrews would have made this statement about him.

Whether Jesus could or could not sin, he didn’t and therefore was the holy and perfect sacrifice required as an atonement for our sins. Christ on the cross covered our sins not by sweeping them under the rug, but “by making an equivalent payment so the offence was actually and exactly paid for.” (3) Through faith in Christ we are reconciled or made right with God, something we could not do for ourselves.

Our second question: Why would Jesus need to be baptized for the repentance of sin when he had no sin? When we think about it, it seems puzzling but there are several reasons. (1) It marks the official beginning of Jesus’ Messianic ministry. At his baptism Jesus was set aside for service “to God and officially approved by him as especially shown in the descent of the Holy Spirit. And the words of the Father.” (4) Jesus met all the requirements necessary for the Messiah as the holy sacrifice needed to make salvation

available to mankind. (2) As notes in my new study Bible, thanks for the Christmas gift, say: “By his baptism Jesus completely identified himself with humanity’s sin and failure (though he himself needed no repentance or cleansing from sin), becoming our substitute.” Out of love for us and obedience to his Father, Jesus who was without sin took our sin upon himself, taking our place so that we could receive his righteousness and be made right with God. (3) Jesus’ baptism was an example to his followers. When I visited Israel twenty-five years ago with my brother and his wife, Eugene and Debbie, we were immersed in the Jordan River. Being a good Methodist and having been baptized at age eleven, I considered it a re-dedication, since Methodists believe that one baptism is sufficient. All but one of the women in our tour group had been baptized and so she was baptized in the Jordan River which made it especially amazing for her and for the rest of us. We were all excited for her. I see baptism as a channel through which God’s grace is conveyed to us. Those few minutes in the Jordan River were for me an experience of God’s grace as I was moved to a closer and deeper understanding of Jesus and his love for all people.

In our final two verses we see that all three persons of the Holy Trinity are involved in the baptism of Jesus. The Father speaks, Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus. Jesus – God’s Son, is the recipient of God’s bounty and blessing. Jesus rising up out of the water after having been fully immersed by John experiences the presence and of the Holy Spirit in his anointing as the Messiah and its empowerment for his mission and ministry. The Holy Spirit came upon him in a gentle way. And God spoke to his Son. “Mark proclaims Jesus as the Son of God; here God the Father himself proclaims Jesus as his Son.” (5) And what did God say? “You are my Son, whom I love; with whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) Jesus needed no more affirmation—could there be any greater than this of his Father? And the next verse of scripture says, “At once the Spirit sent him into the wilderness.” (Mark 1:12) After forty days of prayer, fasting, reflection, and temptation Jesus was ready for his mission to save the world from itself. As we enter a new phase of life as a church family may we never forget that we too have a mission to be ambassadors for Christ and instruments of light and love. Hallelujah!

Amen.

- (1) Our Journey Maxie Dunham p. 14
- (2) NIV Study Bible p. 1643
- (3) NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible p. 60
- (4) NIV Study Bible ‘notes’ p. 1642
- (5) Ibid. “notes” p. 1709