



ROSE  
HILL  
CHURCH

Matthew 3:1-2,13-17  
The Story  
Jesus: His Ministry Begins<sup>i</sup>

Rev. Brian North  
March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018

This morning we continue the series we've been in since September, walking through the Bible chronologically, helping us to see the whole Story of Scripture, to see how God has worked in history, how things connect together, and where it's all headed. We've looked at Creation, the establishment of Israel, the establishment of worship practices, what it means to be in relationship with our Creator, the prophets who sought to help Israel stay on track or get back on track with the Lord, we've looked at the leadership of some of the kings, the division of Israel, their exile and eventual return and rebuilding of Jerusalem...and last week we celebrated Christmas as we began looking at the life of Jesus and his fulfillment of the Old Testament and why he came.

So, if you're just joining in to the series, or if you've missed a couple Sundays, I think: **The important thing to understand here is that Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection isn't something that just happened out of the blue, without any context or any background that led up to it.** Jesus' claims as the Son of Man, his claims to being the foundation for living as we were created to live, his claims to equality with God our heavenly Father, his death on the cross as atonement for sin, His resurrection to eternal life...all of this is not just random, and standing on its own. Rather: **Jesus – and all that he did – is deeply rooted in the history, the life, the faith, and the worship practices of Israel, and their relationship with God.** So there's a connection between the Old Testament and the life of Jesus. This is crucial to understanding. If you really want to understand who Jesus is, you have to have some basic understanding of the Old Testament. That's why we spent 21 weeks in it before getting to the life of Jesus, and it's why I regularly have sermons and whole sermon series that focus on the Old Testament. We can't ignore it.

That being said, there can be no doubt that Jesus is the pinnacle of the Story of Scripture. He's the pinnacle of what God is doing in history. And you'd think that such an important person in what God is doing would be introduced to the stage of the earth in a little more dramatic kind of way. I

mean, there were the angelic visitations to a few select people leading up to his birth...but couldn't God have done something even grander, like Batman putting the signal up in the sky, like Thor coming through the clouds in a swirling storm...could've had a fireworks display, or the aurora borealis.

But that's not how God works. He's not about putting on a glitzy show that fizzles out, but instead, **He's about crafting something over time that is durable and built for the long haul.**

So Jesus comes into the world as a baby, in humble circumstances. But eventually after he's grown in wisdom and in stature, it's time to move out into the public sphere. The beginning of this is with his baptism. John – who we know as John the Baptist – had developed quite a following of people who listened to his teaching about living in relationship with God. The theme of his teaching is summarized in the Bible as “repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near.” He was quite the character – dressed in camel's hair, eating locusts out of one hand, wild honey with the other. Not exactly Mr. Hip and trendy. But people flocked to hear his hard message: they confessed, repented, and were baptized.

Baptism was a practice that developed over time, and had its roots in the Old Testament where several places in Leviticus and Exodus talk about washing with water to be physically clean. But often the reason for washing is connected to entering the Tabernacle and later the Temple, to make a sacrifice to the Lord. That connection of washing to this act of worship certainly brings a spiritual element to this washing, as well; it's a physical washing, but symbolic of something more. Later, we read of God speaking through the prophet Ezekiel before the exiles return to Jerusalem when he writes, **“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you...” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).** So besides other allusions to spiritual cleansing, there's a clear Biblical connection here of water as a symbol of being spiritually clean – and it's not something we do, but something that God does. God is the one who takes the initiative in baptism. And then in Judaism in the century or two

leading up to the birth of Jesus, they developed the practice of using baptism as part of the process for someone who became Jewish as an adult. It became a symbol of the cleansing work that God was doing in that person's life as they came into the Jewish family of faith.<sup>ii</sup>

So picture this: John is out in the wilderness, dressed in camel's hair, locusts in one hand, honey in the other, preaching repentance and spiritual cleansing, and baptizing as a sign of God's work in that cleansing process. And along comes Jesus, who says, "Hey, I need to be baptized, too." This is not what we expect, for those of us who know the rest of the story and what we believe to be true about Jesus. He did not need to be cleansed from sin, and he was already Jewish. **The Bible teaches us that Jesus was the spotless lamb, without blemish, without sin.** This is where understanding what the Israelites did to maintain their relationship with God in the Old Testament is important because that was the kind of sacrifice they made as atonement for their sins. It was always an animal without blemish. This idea that Jesus is the lamb of God and the once-for-all sacrifice when he died on the cross is not an idea that originated with him. This is probably the most important piece of his life when it comes to fulfilling the Old Testament, which Jesus himself says he came to do.

So if Jesus is without blemish: Why did he come to be baptized by John, who was baptizing for the expressed purpose of symbolically washing away sin? Even John recognizes that this is backwards, saying he needs to be baptized by Jesus! Jesus gives us the answer when he responds, "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, it's the right thing to do. It's what his Heavenly Father is calling him to do. And it shows us that Jesus is modeling for us what we are to do. He's not going to ask us to be baptized and not do it himself.

And we see evidence of the rightness of this with the descending of the Spirit upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice from heaven that Jesus is his son, with whom he is well-pleased. **This is all a sign of Jesus' Heavenly Father's blessing upon him.** And this is crucial, because the road of ministry that he would walk was not going to be easy. In his humanity, he needed to know that he had his Heavenly Father's approval and his blessing.

We see that right out of the chute when he is led into the wilderness and is tempted by the devil three different times. What a contrast, to go from the spiritual high of the baptism and his Father's affirmation to this desert experience. These are the events that preceded his launch into public ministry (baptism was public, really). It was like an intensive crash course in spiritual growth, leadership, and where his allegiances really lay...and was a foreshadow of the highs and lows of his ministry.

**Like Jesus' baptism and temptation experiences, we have probably all had experiences like this that have shaped us and formed us – both mountaintop high moments, and really deep lows where we were challenged to the very core of who we are.** On November 24, 2002, Gwen and I were both ordained as Presbyterian ministers. A week after we were ordained, we moved to Salt Lake City.

One of the biggest learning moments I had in Salt Lake City was a couple years later. There was a husband and wife who were one of the "CEO's" of the church: Christmas and Easter Only church members. So I didn't know them at all. Not sure I even met them the first two years I was there. We got a call at the church that the husband had suddenly and unexpectedly died of a heart attack. Pastor Phil asked if I would go and visit with her. I said, "I'd be happy to." He asked how I felt about going into this situation. I said, "I'm fine with it. I'll be ok." So off I went. I didn't know what I was getting in to. I got to the home, went inside, met the wife – I can't recall her name – and I was completely unprepared for the fact that her husband's body was still there on the living room floor.

No one told me that might be the case, and it didn't dawn on me. I'm pretty sure I had never been in the same room as a dead person at that point in my life. I hadn't known him, I didn't know her, there were medical people there, I think there was a police officer there...a couple of neighbors. I think I was at her home for about the next 45 minutes or so and I probably said all of like four sentences the whole time. I had no idea what to do, or what to say. I didn't pray. I didn't read Scripture. I didn't hug her. I don't remember much of anything except just being in this room with a few people who were doing

some different things...I remember the wife who was pretty shook up...and I remember the lifeless body laying there on the floor. I may have technically been alive there in the room, but I may as well have been dead along with him, because I didn't do much of anything. The devil tempted me with timidity and reclusiveness, and uncertainty...and I bit hook, line, and sinker.

I remember a day or two later Pastor Phil calling me into his office and asking me what I'd done when I was there. I told him, "I prayed and preached, we had a spontaneous memorial service, revival broke out, and everyone in the room gave their life to Christ. It was amazing." No...in fact, although he didn't tell me this, I'm sure the gal had called Phil and let him know that the Associate Pastor who'd come by was pretty worthless and needed some serious training. He and I talked about what to do in those situations. It was a major learning moment for me, and I've never forgotten it.

**Before Jesus embarked on his public ministry, he had these two unforgettable moments that he could always remember: that his heavenly father loved him and approved of him before he'd even done a single thing to impact the Kingdom of God there on earth, and he could always remember that even in the face of other temptations or difficulties that His heavenly father was with him through it all.** In his humanity, he needed to know both of those things before he began his public ministry.

Because when he went public, he had both successes and failures. After the temptations in the wilderness, Luke tells us that Jesus' ministry started flourishing and people praised him and news about him spread everywhere (Luke 4:14-15). Then he went into his hometown synagogue, where he grew up, and at first everyone was amazed that one of their own spoke with such knowledge and with such gracious words. But then when he continues teaching and the message gets a little harder to hear, they drove him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:22-30). But soon after he puts together a band of 12 disciples whom he teaches and trains...there are others who follow for lengthy stretches as well, and tons of more people who show up to be healed, or witness the miracles, or to hear his teaching, even if only

one or two times...and then there are others who question him, who doubt him, who walk away from him.

You know, **If Jesus can have this range of responses to him then, it should be no surprise that there's a range of responses to him today.** Maybe you've had some successes and spiritually high moments: Opportunities to share your faith, or to reach out to someone in Christian love, or to disciple someone...or maybe you were particularly touched and nourished in your journey and had a moment or a season of life where God's presence seemed so tangible that you thought you could physically feel him around you. But maybe you've also had some that didn't go the way you hoped they would. Maybe your own kids' journey of faith hasn't been what you thought it would be. Maybe you have a sibling or cousins who have rebuffed your efforts to share the Good News of Jesus with them. Maybe your own response to Jesus' call upon your life has its ups and downs. Maybe you yourself are struggling with a temptation or struggling with a rejection or something that feels like a failure or you're in the desert.

Eventually, we can learn from those situations. But in the midst of them, be assured that your heavenly father is with you. He loves you, and he's pleased with you. Knowing this picks us up when we feel like failures, and it humbles us when we think we're the star of the show. You may not have heard God speak that to you audibly as Jesus did in his baptism. You may not have had the Spirit alight on you so tangibly as Jesus did. But **God is pleased with you before you do a single thing.** He's made you in His image, and the day you were born he said, "This is very good" and that love does not change. He loves you so much that he sent his Son Jesus to live, die, and be raised to new life – for you. This is the Good News, and it's Good News because it's true news. And this news stays both good and true whether we're experiencing incredible spiritual highs and great successes, or whether we're in the desert of life and things are dry and parched. God's love, God's good news, God's grace is not dependent upon what we do. It's always there, ready to envelope us and fill us. That's true for you and for me even as we are here today, and some of us really need to hear this and know it and be reminded of it. And whether you're here this morning and you're in the desert or you're in the most joyous place imaginable...your heavenly father is calling out to you.

He's pleased with you, and He's inviting you into a deeper relationship with him, to trust him in all situations and all circumstances, today and always. Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 22 in "The Story." We took orders for copies of the book, "The Story" at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible" at their website.

<sup>ii</sup> There are a number of resources available online if you want to follow up more. Here are a couple:

<https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/was-baptism-originally-jewish/>

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/what-is-pre-christian-history-of-baptismal-ceremony.html>