
Day 295 - October 22

Jesus the Christ (5 BCE – 30 CE)

The Ministry of John the Baptist

Jesus Faces Temptations

Readings: *Matthew 3:1-17; Mark 1:2-13; Luke 3:1-18; 21-23a; 4:1-13; John 1:19-34*

Reflections:

The Ministry of John the Baptist

- John Declares his Mission: The opening of the section on John the baptizer lists a number of rulers and the dates of when they began ruling. These are key historical markers to indicate the exact year of John's ministry as well as affirm the concern for historical accuracy. Secular historians use these Biblical texts because of their accuracy and so this should give the reader confidence that what is recorded has been captured with that level of attention to detail.
- John Baptizes the People: John is from the priestly cast and portrayed as clearly living out the calling of a prophet. His garb of camel's hair, his food of locust and honey, and his home in the wilderness all display a crazy, over the top, image of a prophet of the Old Testament.
- John Preaches Repentance: His message is radically subversive to the religious establishment. First, anyone who came to John could be baptized (plunged under the water) to be forgiven for her or his sins. According to the Law, the only way a person could be forgiven for their sins was by going to the temple to offer sacrifices. John was offering a free, universally accessible way for people to be completely forgiven by God without having to offer any sacrifices or participate in any religious ritual. It was just as easy as jumping in the river. Instant forgiveness. Second, John's teaching focused on personal lifestyle and issues of justice rather than obsession with religious purity (debates around legalistic adherence to dietary laws or Sabbath keeping) that consumed the attention of the religious leaders of his day. Thirdly, we know from Matthew's account (Matthew 3:7-12) that John positioned himself against the religious leaders by calling them the children of snakes ("brood of vipers" suggested that their father was the Devil and the popular notion was that snakes eat their own children – both were insults of the highest proportions). He also announced that God's judgment was falling

on the religious establishment like a woodsman coming with an ax to chop down a dead tree. Lastly, John is clearly announcing the coming of the Messiah and taking on the prophetic role of preparing the way for the Messiah as predicted by the Old Testament prophets, particularly Malachi. So, here you have a prophet that is coming with an irreligiously subversive message and mission that also claims that he is setting the stage for the long awaited Messiah? The Messiah was supposed to come, kick out the Romans with heaven's army, get everyone back to Israel, get everyone back in line with strict Torah observance and get everyone back on track with the Temple sacrifices. John was going directly against everything that the religious establishment understood and promoted.

- It is fascinating to see who John is speaking too. People from Jerusalem and across all of Judea came to him and he told them to practice radical generosity. Tax collectors, the financial henchmen of the Roman Empire, came to him and he challenged them to live ethical lives (not steal) as they served the Empire. Gentile Roman soldiers came to him and he challenged them to treat people justly. John's message was inclusive of the enemy! He wasn't calling for Israel to attack the enemy but he was calling the enemy to the truth of God's love and justice. These disciples of John also indicate how radically inclusive he was in community. It also raises the question if John was baptizing uncircumcised Roman soldiers. Again, his approach flipped everything on its head for the Jewish people of his day.
- John Announces Christ: John's announcement of the coming of the Messiah makes it crystal clear the key reason why the Messiah is appearing. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (or "plunge you into the Holy Spirit"). Not only will the Messiah come with greater power and authority, John uses his own practice of baptism to give a dramatic visual for how the Messiah will plunge people into the Holy Spirit. His Jewish listeners would have understood that the prophecies of Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Joel would all be fulfilled as people are changed from the inside out as God's Spirit flooded their lives.
- The second image John uses is that of a farmer gathering wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff. This image suggests that there would be a division in the house of Israel between those who were true to God and those who were false. God will own and gather to himself those who have a true heart for him but those who are not truly devoted to God will face a fiery judgment. We will see this clearly fulfilled in Jesus' ministry as his mission and message will gather many to God while there will also be many who oppose him, ultimately to their own destruction (particularly in 70 AD when Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans).
- This promise of the Messiah bringing the Holy Spirit and then calling the true followers to himself is called the Good News. Often times Christians today associate the Good News as being about God forgiving people for their sins. Here we see that at the heart of the Good News is about people being changed from the inside out and through the Spirit then as a result being restored in relationship to God and each other.

- Jesus is Baptized: When Jesus appears on the scene, the first thing he does publically is to be baptized by John. John resists him and asks to be baptized by Jesus. John's baptism was for forgiveness for sins and put him in direct opposition to the temple religious system. Baptism was also a sign of being initiated into a movement. Jesus' was visibly demonstrating through baptism three things. First, he was demonstrating submission to God's will. At the end of his ministry he would go through another act of complete submission. He will willingly accept death as his final act of submission. Second, he demonstrated solidarity with John's movement and from this point on will be the sole point leader for the anti-temple movement. Lastly, he demonstrated solidarity with all people as he willing experiences everything that we as humans must experience including public humility and submission to God.
- Jesus describes his submission to baptism as something that will "fulfill all righteousness." In other words, Jesus is saying that he isn't going to take any short-cuts. He is going the whole distance in living a life of humility and submission to God.
- As Jesus comes up out of the water the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. Jesus' is the first person where we see the coming of the Spirit. In the life of Jesus we are able to see the obvious interplay and inter-relationship between God as Father, Son and Spirit. God is one and at the same time he demonstrates for our benefit how the divine is fully relational. No doubt Jesus is already filled with the Holy Spirit from conception but here we see the manifestation of the Spirit (the exact manifestation we don't know as that is not recorded) so that we know that the age of the Spirit has begun and it has started first with Jesus.
- God then in an audible voice declares complete blessing and affirmation of Jesus as his son. "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." This three part statement is not only for Jesus but for all those who are included in Christ and become God's children.
 - "You are my child" – God owns each of children as his very own. God is a Father and completely embraces and identifies himself with us. He owns us.
 - "Whom I love" – God is not an angry judge that is always on the edge of blowing up at us because of how we have messed up. God loves us deeply and wants us to be secure in his perfect, divine love.
 - "With you I am well pleased" – God actually delights in us. We make him proud. We make him smile. We are his prize and joy. He actually likes us. Picture a parent bragging about their child. That is how God feels about you!
- This threefold blessing is the exact work of the Holy Spirit. Although we might not hear it in an audible voice, these are the realities that God wants to impress on our lives through the Holy Spirit. Paul prayed for all Christ-followers to have this exact experience. See Ephesians 3:14-21, "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. [Notice the reference

to being God's child and in his family] I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. [Here we see understanding of a deeply intimate and personal relationship with Christ through the Spirit] And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge [or mere head knowledge]—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.” We become glory radiators and world changers as God's love frees us from fear and empowers us to be truly other-centered and full of grace.

- Jesus begins his ministry at 30 years old, the age of spiritual maturity. See Joseph (Genesis 41:46); Saul (1 Samuel 31:1); David (2 Samuel 5:4); Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:42); and the Levites (1 Chronicles 23:3).

Jesus Faces Temptation

- Devil Tempts Jesus: Jesus following his baptism and the spiritual high of being launched into his ministry with the full blessing of his Father now led by the Spirit into the desert to face a head to head confrontation with the ancient enemy, Satan. Satan doesn't sneak up on Jesus when he is weak but rather we see that the Spirit leads Jesus directly into this time of testing. Testing is not in opposition to God's will but is actually a key part of fulfilling God's will.
- Jesus' fasts for 40 days and 40 nights. This is the most extreme form of fasting. In the wilderness there was no real source of food and so this was most likely a complete fast with Jesus only drinking water. This fasting was a sign of complete hunger and dependence on God. It also showed how Jesus entered into the suffering of Israel who spent forty years in the wilderness living with so little.
- Satan comes to him after he has completed his 40 day fast. Jesus is physically weak, vulnerable and starving. Satan tempts him with three specific lures:
 - Pleasure: Satan challenges his identity as God's Son and calls him to turn stones into bread for his hungry stomach. This would align with Adam and Eve's temptation to eat the forbidden fruit and their rationalization that it was good for food. Jesus rejects this temptation and instead, Jesus points to Scripture that says that tells all people to feed on God's word (See Deuteronomy 8:3) than to try to feed himself in some form of false way.
 - Pride and Prestige: Satan then tempts him to create a public display of his power by throwing himself down from the temple. It is interesting that he picks the temple. This suggests that Satan was specifically appealing to Jesus for him

to use his power to win immediate approval and acceptance from the religious leaders. This approval might tempt Jesus to think he can bypass the rejection of the religious leaders and ultimately avoid being killed at their hands. Jesus rejects this test by pointing to the Scripture to not put God to a test. (See Deuteronomy 6:16). Interestingly in this temptation, Satan himself quotes Scripture. This shows us that Satan as an angel of light does not typically use lies but prefers to create lies by twisting the truth.

- Power and Possessions: Lastly, Satan tempts him to bypass the cross by seeking to have the kingdoms of the world worship him without having to suffer and die. Here Satan offers the kingdoms of this world and their splendor if Jesus will bow and worship him in that moment. This last temptation ultimately reveals Satan's end goal: he wants to be like God and receive worship as the one true God. Satan's pride leads him to want to sit on God's throne and to be his own god. We see that Satan offers the powers structures and governments but is unable to offer the people. In a sense he offers the only thing he can. He offers the systems that control and manage people's lives. He can't offer the people themselves. If Jesus is to actually save the people themselves, then he would have to go through the suffering of the cross to atone for all sin and open the way for true restored relationship. Jesus rejects this final and most powerful temptation again by quoting Scripture: "Worship the Lord your God alone, and serve him only!" (Deuteronomy 6:13) Jesus fundamentally and totally rejects Satan's delusional request. Jesus has no interest in the kingdoms worshipping him (people forced to honor him through oppressive human power structures). His heart is for all the nations of the world to worship him out of free choice, not because they are controlled or coerced.
- The Devil leaves Jesus and Jesus is cared for by angels. It is likely that they miraculously provided food and restoration for him. Here we see a rare glimpse into Jesus' connection to the spiritual realm of angels. Angels will not appear now until Jesus' is raised from the dead and they attend his empty tomb.
- John Explains Ministry: We see recorded in John's biography John the Baptizer's clear position on his own self understanding as well as his understanding of Jesus' identity. John the Baptizer made it clear that he was not the Messiah nor was he a physically returned Elijah the Prophet. Apparently the religious leaders thought that Elijah may physically return. Here again we see how the religious leaders are unable to separate essence from form. They expected that Malachi 4:5 to be fulfilled literally. "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes." John was making it clear that he was like Elijah fulfilling Isaiah 40:3 "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord.'" Or as John puts it, "I am the voice of one calling the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" This notion of making a straight path refers to a heart condition rather than something organizational or institutional. It

is a phrase to suggest that the community needed to prepare themselves to receive God's anointed leader. John is also not the Prophet, a reference to Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15). Acts 3:22 actually identifies Jesus as the Prophet in fulfillment of the religious leaders' expectations. What is interesting is that both Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus when he is transfigured before these key disciples (see Matthew 17:3-4; Mark 9:4-5; Luke 9:30-33).

- John the Baptizer makes it clear that he is so far beneath Jesus that he is not even worthy to untie his sandals, an act a servant might do before washing his feet.
- John Says Jesus is Christ: John then calls Jesus the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world, the one filled with the Spirit, the Son of God. These are huge statements with profound theological ramifications. This reveals how clearly John the Baptizer understood Jesus' identity, mission and divinity. John now does all he can to see all of those who had joined his movement (his anti-temple movement) to now fully align with Jesus. John laid the foundation but now Jesus would take centre stage and lead the irreligious revolution. In time, he would lay his life down as the Lamb of God (like the Passover Lamb) to remove all sin from those who believe. The Jewish people understood the significance of the sacrificial lamb that removed sin and opened the way for salvation in the exodus. No doubt the term Lamb of God would have conjured up clear Messianic images along with the other titles John was bestowing on Jesus. The prophets had also indicated that the Messiah would send the Spirit to transform people from the inside out with the power and love of God. Again, the notion of Jesus' being filled with the Spirit and being the Son of God could only have meant to John's listeners that this was indeed the Messiah. What amazing news!