

## Jesus' Coming of Age

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, January 8, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 2:41-52](#) and [Luke 3:1-14, 21-22](#)

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Our first lesson is the conclusion of the overture to Luke's gospel. You may remember I talked about this a month ago, this idea that the birth and childhood narratives in Matthew and Luke serve a similar purpose as an overture to a Broadway musical. They act as a bridge to bring you into the story you're about to hear and they introduce the themes you'll hear later in the story.

So we heard the end of Luke's overture. It's his last chance to get you ready to hear the rest of his gospel. And as simple as the story is, it is rich with foreshadowing.

The setting is the Passover in Jerusalem. Passover is the most important festival of the Hebrew year. This is when the Jews remember how God led them from slavery to freedom, how God made them a people with the gift of the Torah. The Passover story is told in both the past- and present-tenses; God freed us and God is freeing us. So the story is about both Egypt and Jerusalem, both Pharaoh and Caesar. When Luke finishes his gospel, Jesus will be back in Jerusalem and it will be at the Passover and he will be facing down the Pharaoh of his day, Caesar's representative in Jerusalem.

There's a wonderful moment any parent can identify with in today's first lesson. The family is returning to Nazareth with a big crowd of neighbors who also went to Jerusalem for the Passover. They assume Jesus is with his friends, somewhere in the crowd. When they discover that he is not, the search begins. For three days, they look for him, going back to Jerusalem. Three days. That will show up again at the end of Luke's gospel.

When they finally find him, he's in the Temple. He has to be in the courtyard, because his mother is present, and women were only allowed so far into the Temple. But he's not playing tiddlywinks with some other kids. He's with teachers, with rabbis, deep in discussion. He's asking impressive questions and he's giving impressive answers. Now, one assumes that the answers he's giving are to the questions the teachers are asking. That certainly would be the Jewish style of exploring a text or discussing theology. Everybody gets to ask questions and everybody gets to offer their answers, and somewhere in the midst of all that, some word of God's truth will emerge. But the text doesn't say that – at least the English translation doesn't say that. It could be that Jesus' impressive answers are his answers to his own questions.

Imagine the setting. Learned teachers sitting around the Temple courtyard, talking theology. This 12-year-old joins the discussion and starts asking questions, deep, penetrating questions. A kid questioning men who are the authorities in the field. And his questions are wise, as are his answers. He is teaching the teachers

and questioning their authority – a theme that will come up again and again in Luke’s gospel.

And then there’s this. When his parents find him, he’s surprised that they think he is lost. “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” At the annunciation, Gabriel told Mary that her child would be called ‘the Son of the Most High’ and ‘the Son of God’ (1:32, 35). We know Jesus’ secret identity. And if we missed it there, Jesus says it here. “Luke’s Jesus is fully conscious of his divine status and asserts to his parents – but publically – that he is the Son of God and this is his Father’s house.”<sup>1</sup>

This theme of Jesus as the Son of God is one of the first themes we hear in the main body of Luke’s gospel. Our second lesson is about John at the River Jordan baptizing people and Jesus coming to be baptized. And it is in the act of baptism that heaven proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Luke begins the main body of his gospel the same way he started his overture: by talking about John the baptizer. You’ll recall from the overture that John’s father, Zechariah, was a Temple priest. Brian McLaren says that this probably meant that John had some comfort and privilege growing up.<sup>2</sup> Priestly positions were clan-based, so one would have thought John would have grown up to become a Temple Priest. As a PK (a priest’s kid), John would have known all about Tevilah, a Jewish purification ritual of immersing in water in a Mikva, an indoor pool naturally sourced with water.<sup>3</sup> It was used as an act of purification and it was a central part of the conversion ritual in Judaism. This purification was required before entering the Temple, to allow Jews to present themselves to God free from the contamination of the outside world. McLaren points out that this ritual also “preserved religious identity during a time of occupation and domination by ‘unclean foreigners.’”<sup>4</sup>

“Can you imagine how shocking it was for Zechariah’s son to burst onto the scene, preaching and performing baptisms – not in Jerusalem, but over eighty miles to the north and east? Can you imagine the disruption of him performing ritual cleansing – not in the private, holy baths near the Temple, but in public, out in the countryside, along the banks of the Jordan River? Can you imagine the gossip about his choice to trade the luxurious robes of the priesthood for the rough garments of a beggar, and the high-class menu of Jerusalem for the subsistence fare of the wilderness? What would such actions have meant?

“John’s departure from both family and Temple suggested that John was protesting against the religious establishment his father faithfully served. Jerusalem’s Temple was not all it was held up to be, he would have been saying. A new kind of baptism – with a radical new meaning – was needed. Traveling to a

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 255.

<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* [Kindle version], chapter 19, page 87. Retrieved from amazon.com.

<sup>3</sup> “History of Baptism,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_baptism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_baptism) (accessed 7 January 2017).

<sup>4</sup> McLaren, *op. cit.*

special city and an opulent building could not make people clean and holy. What they needed most was not a change in location, but a change in orientation, a change in heart. People needed a different kind of cleanness – one that couldn't come through a conventional ceremonial bath in a holy temple.

“According to John, the identity that mattered most wasn't one you could inherit through tribe, nationality, or religion – as descendants of Abraham, for example. The identity that mattered most was one you created through your actions ... by sharing your wealth, possessions, and food with those in need, by refusing to participate in the corruption so common in government and business, by treating others fairly and respectfully, and by not being driven by greed. One word summarized John's message: *repent*, which means 'rethink everything,' or 'question your assumptions,' or 'have a deep turnaround in your thinking and values.' His baptism of repentance symbolized being immersed in a flowing river of love, in solidarity not just with the clean, privileged, superior *us* – but with everyone, everywhere.

“Like prophets of old, John issued a powerful warning: God would soon intervene to confront wrong and set things right, and the status quo would soon come to an end. Crowds started streaming out to the countryside to be baptized by John. His protest movement grew, and with it, expectations and hope....

“John kept thundering out his message of warning and hope, week after week, month after month. He dared to confront the powerful and name their hypocrisy. (Herod Antipas, the son of the Herod who tried to kill Jesus [according to Matthew's gospel], couldn't withstand the agitation of John's protest movement, so he ultimately would have John arrested and, eventually, beheaded.)

“Among the crowds coming to be baptized one day was a young man about John's age. By receiving John's baptism, this young man identified himself with this growing protest movement in the Galilean countryside.”<sup>5</sup> And by receiving John's baptism, something radical and transformative began.

Retired Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan tells of baptizing a two-year-old boy in a Sunday worship service. After the child had been baptized, Pastor Buchanan, following the directions of the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and said to him, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” It was a holy moment made more holy by the little boy's response: “Uh-oh!”<sup>6</sup>

There is a deep element of “Uh-oh” in being baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ. The demands on our lives are not a trifling matter when we're disciples of Jesus. We have to rethink everything our culture tells us. We have to question our assumptions about what is of value and where the boundaries of love should be.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 87-89.

<sup>6</sup> From an email from sermons.com dated 3 January 2017.

Luckily, it's not all burden. There is also a deep blessing in being baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was baptized by John, he experienced heaven cracking open and God's spirit pouring down. This man, this physical human body experienced not just the water moistening skin, but a bath of God's love. And God's voice called out to him saying, "You are my child, whom I dearly love. In you I find pleasure."

God says the same thing to us.

We live in a culture that pushes us to take on labels to identify and define us, and often separate us – Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, American or foreigner, gay or straight or bi, rich or poor, Black or White, and the list of labels goes on. "Additionally, we are also and increasingly named and defined by the products we use or stores at which we shop. Nike, Apple, BMW, Tiffany, Hallmark – these are not just company names, but lend a particular sense of self, and increasingly the brand labels on our shirts, shoes, cars, and computers convey a great deal of our identity."<sup>7</sup> Though we live in a culture that pushes us to take on labels, only one really matters and really defines us, once we've gotten wet. We are Christians, disciples of Jesus.

And like Jesus, we, too, are beloved children of God. Sure, the other labels may have some meaning to us. It's just that "while all these other names, affiliations, and identifications may *describe* us, the dare not *define* us."<sup>8</sup> Only the name we receive in baptism truly defines us: Beloved Child of God.

In Jewish culture, Jesus officially came of age when he was 12. But his real coming of age – of the new age he was bringing – happens at his baptism. He is now "a man with a dove-like spirit, a man with the gentleness of a lamb [as John called him], a man of peace whose identity was rooted in this profound reality: *God's beloved child*."

"When we awaken within that deep relationship of mutual love and pleasure, we are ready to join in God's peace movement today – an adventure of protest, hope, and creative, non-violent, world-transforming change."<sup>9</sup>

As we move into our time of quiet, I invite you to reflect on ...  
... anything from the sermon or scripture that caught your attention; or  
... the memory of your own baptism or some other recognition of a milestone in your life; or  
... the idea of John the Baptist breaking with tradition and what that would look like in your life; or  
... this message from God to you: "You are my child, whom I dearly love. In you I find pleasure."

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<sup>7</sup> David Lose, "Baptism of Our Lord A: Family Name," ... *in the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/01/baptism-of-our-lord-a-family-name/> (posted and accessed 4 January 2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> McLaren, *op. cit.*, 89.