

January 13, 2013

Baptism of Christ

What type of man do you think Jesus was? That question has many possible answers, of course. One thing about him that we see in Luke's Gospel more often than any of the other Gospels was how often Jesus prayed. For example, in the Gospel scene today, we're told that Jesus was praying as the Holy Spirit descended on him after he had been baptized. And throughout Luke's Gospel we hear how often Jesus was at prayer, especially at key moments in his life. But how do you think that Jesus became the man he was? What were the experiences, especially in his youth, which formed him and made him a man known for prayer?

We might imagine that Jesus was just born that way—being God's Son and all, prayer must have come easily for Jesus. But Jesus was also fully human and his adult life turned out the way it did at least in part because of how he was formed as a child and youth. You know the old saying, "The boy is the father of the man." So what was Jesus like growing up? And how did it make him a man of prayer?

If you are a student of the Bible or if you have just heard the Gospels over the years in church, one thing you know is that we don't know much about Jesus as a child or youth. Mark and John's Gospels tell us nothing about Jesus at this age. Only Luke and Matthew give us brief glimpses of what Jesus was like before the beginning of his public life as an adult. So learning what made him the man he became-- especially a man known for his praying-- is not clear. But what do we know?

Luke tells us about the Annunciation to Mary that promised the miraculous conception of Jesus. Then Luke tells us about his special birth with angels and shepherds surrounding him, the scene we celebrate on Christmas Eve. Now most mothers think their children are special; imagine how Mary must have felt about Jesus after all that. So Jesus grew up in a home where his parents had a profound faith in God and a deep love for him. That faith and love shaped him.

But that was not all that went into forming Jesus. Matthew tells us that after the Wise Men came to King Herod and Herod responded with his evil plan to kill the children of Bethlehem, that Joseph was warned in a dream to flee. Joseph, Mary and Jesus became refugees in Egypt. Now Jesus was probably under two during all this turmoil. How would that experience have shaped him? Children that young may not fully understand everything, but children can pick up on their parents' fear and worry and the intensity of their prayers. That time as a refugee shaped the man Jesus became.

We don't hear much more about his childhood until Jesus showed up in the Temple around the age of twelve. While there, we're told that he was amazingly precocious about Scripture. Jesus could hold his own with the biblical experts of his day. We can imagine that his parents and the local rabbi and teachers taught him well; and that Jesus probably did some extra studying on his own. He not only memorized the Hebrew Scripture, but he thought about them, prayed about them, and that led to insights and questions that surprised and intrigued the religious scholars of his day. So his knowledge of

Scripture combined with the practice of prayer and reflection shaped the boy that became the man, Jesus.

But again, that's not all. Something else happened between the time when the precocious adolescent Jesus was in the Temple at twelve; and the time of his Baptism around the age of thirty. We're not told exactly what happened or when, but we can figure it out from who is not present in the story when Jesus became an adult—Joseph. Sometime in his teen years, or maybe his twenties, Joseph died. How did Joseph's death form the man Jesus became and form the way Jesus prayed?

I am sure Jesus personally grieved at the loss of Joseph. And he grieved as he saw the sorrow of his mother Mary. Joseph's death may have changed Jesus' life in other ways. Perhaps instead of continuing the path to become a rabbi, maybe even studying with a well-known rabbi in Jerusalem; maybe Jesus decided to stay close to home. Jesus may have taken over the family business and helped Mary make ends meet after Joseph died. Of course we don't know the details, but that sounds likely.

Whatever happened after Joseph died shaped the man that Jesus became. The lost dreams for the young man, the extra burdens of responsibility at a young age, the personal and family sorrow at the death of a beloved husband and father-- all this shaped him as he became an adult and it deepened the way that Jesus prayed. That life change changed the quality of Jesus' prayers. Jesus was now more than a precocious religious student; his faith had been tested by the realities of life.

Because we have no record of those intervening years between twelve and thirty, we can only imagine what else might have happened besides the death of Joseph and the resulting changes in the life of Jesus. But we do know where Jesus eventually showed up—at the Jordan River, near where his famous kinsman John the Baptist was preaching. What was on his mind as Jesus came down to the river to pray?

We know Jesus was not like the typical member of the crowd that came to hear John. Christian dogma teaches that Jesus was without sin. But back then, even without that later belief of the church, people could probably tell that Jesus was a righteous man. Why would a good man like that come to John? But Jesus did. Maybe he was looking for something more in life. Maybe the stories of his childhood, his special conception and angelic birth continued to echo in his mind. Maybe it was Jesus' life of prayer, the Spirit drawing Jesus to John for reasons that Jesus didn't fully understand.

Regardless, Jesus went down to the Jordan and was baptized. The heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and Jesus learned that God takes delight in him. God takes delight in him! What a message—those are words that can change a life and change how a person prays. At that moment, Jesus learned that all of his life that came before had prepared him for this day and the knowledge that no matter what his life was like—whether the joy of a loving family and a strong faith; or the fear of a refugee, the sorrow of an orphan—that no matter what, God is with him and God takes delight in him.

Once Jesus understood that, his life changed. He was able to begin his public ministry. He could see his early life in a different light. All the good and even the bad that shaped him into the man he became-- and God delighted in that man. Prayer for Jesus became more than a religious duty or a call for

help in difficulties (though at times it was probably that, too). Prayer also became the time when Jesus could re-connect with God—with the heavenly father who loves him so deeply.

So how about all of us? How has our life from childhood on shaped the adults we have become? And based on those early years, how has our experience of God, our life of prayer, shaped us into the people we are today? I imagine that varies for many of us, but there are some common themes that we may all be able to appreciate.

One theme is that for almost all of us, there are people who loved us as we were growing up. Some of us had difficult early years and none of us had Mary and Joseph for parents. But whether it was our parents or grandparents or Sunday school teachers, we all had someone who loved us, who prayed for us, and was there for us when we needed them. Think for a moment-- who was that for you? Because that person, those people, shaped us into the man or woman we are today.

Another theme is that almost all of us have faced difficulties in our lives. Some are faced in early years, some when we are older; some of us may feel like our life is just one challenge after another. Those challenges shape us into the adults we become. No one wants bad health, or the death of loved ones, or whatever challenge we may face; but there are so many stories of people who have faced those challenges, been shaped by them, and then by God's grace have become better, deeper people. This happened not in spite of those challenges but in some way because of them. That happened with Jesus. Difficulties shaped him just like they shape us.

The key theme, though, for all of us, is the importance of learning to pray. Jesus learned that through faithful training at home and in the synagogue; and then as his prayers were tested and deepened through the difficulties and challenges of his life. Then the day came when his prayers revealed the deep love God had for him—the reality that God took delight in him! That type of prayer guided Jesus and further shaped him into the adult he became. That type of prayer enabled Jesus to have joy and courage as he experienced life. The good news for us today is that the same type of prayer is available for us if we remember Jesus' example and follow him.

Amen.