

If

Luke 4:1-13

February 14, 2016

Jesus returned from the Jordan ...

What had happened there, while Jesus was at the Jordan River? Jesus was baptized by John. Before Jesus began any of his work, before he began bringing good news to the poor and healing the sick and welcoming outcasts and setting slaves free, he was baptized by John.

And after he was baptized, as he was praying, a voice from heaven, God's voice, spoke. And the voice said?

You are my own dear Son.

"You are my own dear Son!" Think of what it meant to Jesus to hear that. What an extraordinary privilege, to be God's own dear Son!

"You are my own dear Son!" Think of what it meant to Jesus to hear that. What a daunting responsibility, to be God's own dear Son!

Jesus returned from the Jordan, and then? Into the desert! Into the desert, alone, for forty days, eating nothing, doing nothing but praying, and being tested. If baptism is Jesus' commissioning for ministry, the desert is his training for ministry. Before he could begin the work God had for him, he had to be chosen and he had to be prepared.

Prepared how? By being tested. By being purged, body and spirit, emptied of everything he had to rely on. Except? When you let go of everything, then what do you have? And the testing began with one word: "if."

If you are God's Son ...

"If" plants a seed of doubt. Maybe you imagined it. Maybe you were hearing things. You really think you heard God's voice? You really think you -- Joseph's son, Mary's boy -- could be God's Son? Get real! If you are God's Son, then what in the world are you doing here starving in the desert?

"If" plants a seed of doubt and that is a test, of Jesus' will, of his confidence, of his trust, but even more so, and what is, I think, a much harder test, "if" makes Jesus an invitation. If you are God's Son, then be God's Son! Show it! Claim it! Prove it! Take full advantage of your enormous privilege. Put your unmatched opportunity to good use.

Prove who you are, to yourself and to the world! Be God's Son! Own your identity! Own your power! Use your power! Exploit your power! But you know what they say about power. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." And if you are God's Son?

If you are God's Son ...

Did Jesus claim it? Did he own it? Did he defend his prerogative, defend his right to claim that name? Not at all. He did nothing, he said nothing, to lay claim to being God's Son. As the hymn says:

*Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, humbled himself,
and walked the path of obedience all the way.*

Jesus' answers show that his only claim is to be a man, a human being.

You are hungry! You need to eat! Turn this stone into bread and eat!

Jesus answered: "Human beings cannot live on bread alone." I am a human being, and as a human being, I need more than bread to live.

I will give you all the wealth and the power you could ever imagine, if you just worship me! Which, of course, is the same thing, because running after wealth and power is worshiping the Devil!

Jesus answered: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." I am a human being and I will serve only one master -- my Lord, not money, my God, not power.

Throw yourself down. Show me, show yourself, that God will protect you, that God will take care of you, that God does love you, his own dear Son!

Jesus answered: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." I am a human being. I trust my God and will not try God's patience by testing him.

If you are God's Son ...

Jesus ignores the question and answers not as the Son of God, but as a child of God, one of us. One of us! Tempted, as we are, to seek money and power. Tempted as we are to put our own needs, our own selves, first. Tempted as we are to try God's patience. He was tempted in every way as we are, but he did not cave. He did not sin.

He did not sin, but remained humble and obedient to his God. So, is he not one of us after all? Because we all fail. We all sin. Or is it that he is one of us, and that by walking the path of obedience all the way, as one of us, he opens up a whole new realm of possibility for each of us?

Is he one of us? Really one of us?

Look! Look at him!



What do you see? You see around him and behind him symbols of heaven, symbols of glory, symbols of divinity. You see emblems of the four evangelists: Matthew, the man; Mark, the lion; Luke the bull; John the eagle. You see him surrounded by stars. You see the ΙΧΧΣ, the Greek contraction for ΙΗΣΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, “Jesus Christ.” You see the halo behind his head with the letters ὁ ὢν, which is ὁ ὢν, “the one who is,” a designation for God, the one who is.

But what do you see of him? Who is he?

He is Jesus, Masai warrior, strong and fierce, defending his people, protecting his family.

He is Jesus, Masai elder brother, taking responsibility for his siblings, standing up for them, advocating for them, sacrificing himself for them.

What do you think of this Jesus? What do you think of a warrior Christ? What do you think of a virile, masculine Christ? What do you think of a black Christ?

Don't tell me this is not what Jesus looks like, because you don't know what Jesus looks like! And he almost certainly does not look like our common portrayals -- light skinned and long-haired and ethnically generic, not looking like any of us!

Neither I nor the artist are claiming that Jesus looks like this. But Jesus looks like this! You know what I mean? He is a particular man, a particular human being, like each one of us, ethnically specific, with a distinctive cultural identity, fully situated in a particular social context, fully human. He is one of us.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, you have come to us and shared our common lot.

Jesus belongs to us. Jesus is one of us, as fully human as any of us are fully human. Jesus shared our common lot. And because Jesus has shared our common lot, our common lot has become anything but common!

He has stood with us. He has stood for us, his brothers and sisters, the fierce warrior who has gone to battle with our greatest enemies, and won! Look at him! He is your brother. He has your back. He has saved your life.

*In Christ alone my hope is found;
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This cornerstone, this solid ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My comforter, my all in all --
Here in the love of Christ I stand.*