

Put Me in, Coach!

Message for January 24, 2010

A young man goes into the temple and is asked to read the Holy Word.

The people in his hometown know and like him - he's lived among them since he was very young.

While there was some fuss about his birth, after a while he and his family settled into regular routines. He studied the Word with the other boys and worshiped at Temple with the men, and his mother spoke of him and described his youthful activities with the women.

As an adolescent, he seemed to be a leader of sorts...on any given day he could be seen walking the streets of town, dragging a small group of boys with him – one of them a cousin, of the same age, named John.

The people of the town observed changes as he grew older – he didn't seem to care about the usual “young man” issues like finding a partner and getting married.

He spent more time alone – often going out beyond the walls into the desert for days at a time, where there was the danger of the unknown, and only the sounds of nature to keep him company.

His choice of friends concerned his parents. He often could be seen in the less respectable parts of town, speaking with the “others” who were overlooked or ignored: vagrants from other countries and cultures,

women – widows and prostitutes, Gentiles.

Friends of the family also noticed the young man's idiosyncrasies, and it became the theme of conversation in the market, in the local bar, at Temple.

“What's with Jesus?” the men would say. “Maybe he's not right in the head – who would choose to leave the walls of the city or hang out with those unholy ones? All that attention when he was young must have done something to that boy's mind.”

And women gathering water at the well had their own discussion: “His mother must be heartsick – so strange, so different than everyone else. He has no wife and children – poor Mary – to live without grandchildren to bless her old age!”

Oblivious to their criticism and cynicism, and nearing his thirtieth birthday, the young man felt the need to separate himself, cleanse himself and find his true faith - he needed peace to hear the voice of God.

The desert wilderness and his true Father called, and he went to listen and learn.

This time he fasted and lingered for 40 days.

The hours alone were filled with passing of days and nights – he was coming to understand the purpose of his life and how God's path would lead him, when a Dark Spirit interrupted his meditation and prayers.

“You are hungry – make some bread from these stones.”

He ignored the growl of his stomach.

“You have special powers – save yourself from falling off that cliff.”

He pretended he was a rock – solid and heavy – and stayed put.

“Your true Father is nothing compared to what I can be for you – I’ll give you the world if you follow me instead.”

He closed his eyes – he envisioned the face of his Father God, and felt the hand of Eternal Love bless him with grace and strength to do his work.

The time had come for him to fulfill his destiny.

The Dark Spirit left – for now.

And after being tempted to do the opposite of God’s Way, the young man knew he’d passed the test, and he was ready.

When he returned to his town, they all noticed that something had changed.

His walk, his gaze, his peace – this was Jesus all right, but he acted like a completely different person.

Forty days in the desert would do something, that was certain.

But they couldn't quite understand what they were feeling about him.

And so, to Temple on the Sabbath for worship.

“When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

‘God's Spirit is on me;

he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,

to set the burdened and battered free,

to announce, "This is God's year to act!"”

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent.

Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."

The silence was deafening...who did he think he was anyhow? Did he just tell us that he thinks he's the Messiah?

Rabbis and other church leaders looked at one another in disbelief – the nerve of this guy.

“We’ve heard this before” they whispered to one another – “there have been many before him who claimed to be the Messiah, and we all know what happened to them. They were put to death, just like that.”

Put to death – just like that.

With this moment of confidence and clarity, Jesus accepted his destiny and began a three-year mission on behalf of his God.

Like a star quarterback, he’d been tapped to go in and turn things around – and he’s ready.

Jesus, the self-proclaimed Son of God has arrived.

The people of his town – the Jews - will reject him, but thousands more away from Nazareth will experience the quiet strength - and faith - and hope that he will bring, and he will make many new friends.

His life, and the lives of all those “others” will never be the same; God will prevail, in God’s time.

(Pause)

In the following weeks, we’ll walk with Jesus as he takes his ministry on the road.

Unlike the townspeople of Nazareth, we are already believers, reliving the stories and reminding ourselves that the way Jesus lived is how we, too should live.

Some of the stories will make us feel good about ourselves and our faith – some will make us uncomfortable and cause us to squirm as we ask hard questions – but all of them are our destiny, too.

Jesus' journey is our journey, and we're walking that bumpy and crooked road together.

Let's watch and listen, and find new commitment and hope as we experience the ministry of God's Son.

Amen.