

“The Case for Adoption”

Luke 3.15–17 and 21–22

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, Jan. 11, 2004

Who is Jesus? For many of us, that is a central question of our faith, one that we grapple with from the time we’re in elementary school until ripe old age. That question has occupied the minds of theologians for 2,000 years in a specialty called Christology, and it has caused exclusion, condemnation, excommunication, and even death. The beautiful thing about asking that question here at Plymouth is that you can answer it in any number of ways without the fear of being ostracized or excommunicated; in fact, you’ll be encouraged to explore it! You might think that Jesus and God are synonymous; that’s fine! You might think that Jesus was a prophet or an incredibly wise human, a lens through which we see the likeness of God; that’s fine, too!

You’ve actually been hearing several different perspectives over the last month, in answer to that key question. When I preached at the end of December about Mary’s Song of Praise, the Magnificat, and about the incarnation, God coming fully into human form, I spoke about the idea that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. That’s one way of looking at who Jesus was.

Last week, Dick gave a great sermon on the prologue to John’s gospel, in which the writer in beautiful poetry records, “In the beginning was the logos, and the logos was with God, and the logos was God.” And the author also says that “the logos became flesh and dwelled among us.” So that’s a similar way of answering the “Who was Jesus” question, but that the logos, the word or intelligence, was pre-existent is something really separates the relationship of the historical Jesus from the cosmic Christ.

And today’s reading has a different perspective still, which you *didn’t* hear in the reading of the scripture. To piece together any of the four gospels we have in our Bible, scholars must look through various fragments of papyrus, complete versions of the gospel bound into a codex, and quotations of the gospels in ancient authors to try and determine which piece of the text to include, because they often have slight (or sometimes dramatic) variations.

Other ancient authorities cite Luke’s gospel this way: “when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”¹

Wait a minute... wasn’t Jesus begotten by the Holy Spirit sometime before Christmas? Didn’t we just celebrate the Nativity of our Lord? At the point of his baptism, Jesus is a young man! That throws a whole new twist on the idea that Jesus had a unique relationship to God from day one (or even before day one, if you work with John’s gospel).

Do you remember when we read Psalm 2 a few minutes ago? In verse 7 we read the same words: “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” So, the alternative version of Luke’s gospel echoes Psalm 2 and fits in with the strict monotheistic Jewish tradition into which Jesus was born: that Jesus was essentially adopted by God as the Son of God and messiah not at the beginning of time, nor at his birth, but rather in the midst of prayer, following his baptism.

¹ quoted in Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, see ref. in *HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 1962 and critical ref. in *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*.

I want to unpack that some more. What does the psalmist mean when he writes, “son of God?” Patrick Miller, who teaches at Princeton Seminary, writes that this is part of a decree that is part of the ‘royal protocol legitimating the king of Israel at the time of enthronement. ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’ is a formula of the adoption of the king, who from that point on is viewed as God’s son.”

So, we have the Jewish perspective that kings of Israel are anointed (a term transliterated as “messiah”) and that they are adopted as sons of God. This happened in the Roman world, as well: Julius Caesar adopted Octavian, who would later become Augustus. The notion of the father-son relationship was absolutely critical in the ancient near east: it was the linkage that perpetuated patriarchy, and it was a way to describe a relationship that would transfer power and authority from males in one generation to another. So, to say that a man is a “son of God” is to say that he has an incredibly close bond with the elder and that the power and authority of the elder rests with him. That sounds pretty heavily male, I know, but that was the reality of the 1st century.

So, who was Jesus? Was he a righteous man adopted by God? Was he anointed/messiah/Christ: three ways of saying the same word in English, Hebrew, and Greek?

In the early centuries of our faith tradition, there was not one Christianity, but *multiple Christianities*. And “Jewish-Christianity” was one of the dominant schools of thought in the first century. It existed in the church in Jerusalem, which was obliterated by the Romans in 70 A.D., and it existed in Syria. But when the emperor Constantine declared Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire and had the bishops hammer out their theological differences at the Council of Nicea in the year 325, all sorts of things became either orthodox or heretical. And the idea of adoptionism – that Jesus was a human being adopted by God – was placed on the heretical list in bold type.

So, who is Jesus? The Jewish-Christians and Adoptionists would say that he was a righteous man who was so observant of Torah, so much a reflection of God’s desire for humanity, that God adopted Jesus as his own son, making him the messiah, the Christ.

All of this may be interesting to theologians, but I’ll hazard a guess that there are a few of you out in the congregation with the words, “So, what?” on your minds. The question – who Jesus the man was and who the risen Christ is – is not an academic abstraction like trying to argue how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. There are multiple ways of thinking about Jesus, and if we take the life and teachings of Jesus seriously, we need to examine his full humanity, because it gives us “a model of human wholeness and human responsibility.”

For me, looking at Jesus’ humanity makes him more real. It makes Jesus into a genuine “guy,” one whom I can try to emulate, even if I’m never going to get it all quite right. For me, as a person who claims the name “Christian,” Jesus gives me an ethical gold standard by which I can measure human thought, decision making, and ethics.

Another subtlety of the text in Luke’s gospel this morning concerns the sequence of events in John baptizing Jesus, which contains an interesting variation from Mark and Matthew and certainly from John’s gospel, which doesn’t even describe Jesus’ baptism. According to Mark and Matthew, when Jesus is baptized, the sky opens up and a dove descends and the voice says, “You are my son with you I am well pleased.” But the way Luke tells the story, all the folks who were gathered at the Jordan, including Jesus, are baptized by John, yet nothing of a cosmic nature happens. It isn’t until Jesus *had been* baptized and was praying that the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends and the

voice booms out: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.” This is the eastern Orthodox tradition’s way of looking at the Epiphany: that it’s less about the arrival of the Magi and more about the manifestation of God in Jesus following his baptism.

The author of Luke’s gospel is trying to establish Jesus’ legitimacy as the Son of God. Interestingly, what follows after the passage in this morning’s lectionary reading is a huge genealogical listing of Jesus’ ancestors (on Joseph’s side of the family, it’s worth noting), going back to David and Jesse, back to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, back to Shem and Noah. And the concluding verse is “son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.”²



I was talking last week with one of our members about an article that appeared at the end of December in the *Christian Science Monitor*³ about rapidly growing megachurches. One of the observations of the writer was that part of their success in attracting large numbers of people is their scrupulous avoidance of controversial issues like abortion, homosexuality, social and racial justice, and peace.

I think the only way to be Christian and to avoid that list of controversial subjects is to view the life of Jesus as irrelevant. And I think that the tendency among Christians in this country is to do just that: to focus on the church as an institution, to consider the risen Christ, but to ignore Jesus the man, whose life was a living sacrament, bridging the desires of God and humankind.

Now, some conservative Christian groups like Focus on the Family and Pat Robertson’s media empire certainly engage the tough issues, though from quite a different standpoint than we in the United Church of Christ do. And those non-church conservative Christian groups provide a subtext, a metanarrative, for the viewpoint of some fundamentalist megachurches. Yet, if we take Jesus the person seriously – if we take to heart the life of this man and his teachings and his subversive wisdom – we make it impossible to disregard oppression, poverty, violence, and injustice.

Some of you are old enough or young enough to know the folk-rock singer Jackson Browne, who wrote a song about five years ago called “The Rebel Jesus,” and I’d like to read you some of the lyrics.

All the streets are filled with laughter and light
 And the music of the season
 And the merchants’ windows are all bright
 With the faces of the children
 And the families hurrying to their homes
 As the sky darkens and freezes
 Will be gathering around the hearths and tables
 Giving thanks for God’s graces
 And the birth of the rebel Jesus

...

We guard our world with locks and guns
 And we guard our fine possessions
 And once a year when Christmas comes
 We give to our relations
 And perhaps we give a little to the poor
 If ... generosity should seize us

² Lk 3.38

³ *Christian Science Monitor*, “The Rise of the American Megachurch” by Kris Axtman, p. 1.

But if any one of us should interfere
In the business of why there are poor
They get the same as the rebel Jesus

But pardon me if I have seemed
To take the tone of judgment
For I've no wish to come between
This day and your enjoyment
In a life of hardship and of earthly toil
We have need for anything that frees us
So I bid you pleasure
And I bid you cheer
From a heathen and a pagan
On the side of the rebel Jesus

My hunch is that Jackson Browne, a self-described heathen and pagan, has a better idea about the message of Jesus than many of us who call ourselves Christians, because he is grappling with Jesus in his full, controversial, confrontational humanity.
Amen.