



## Jesus as an Evangelist

March 1: 9-15

March 5, 2006

This past Wednesday, I was in this sanctuary with over one hundred people for the first of our Community Lenten Services. I had gotten some ashes from my Episcopalian friend Phil Byrum, mixed them with some olive oil to make a paste as black as printer's ink, and then I smeared the sign of the cross in ashes upon the foreheads of all who came forward. To each person I said the traditional words, "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return." But then I couldn't resist adding an impromptu P.S., which went something like, "But that's not the end of the story in Christ." That must have been the Baptist in me. For a Baptist who has only recently come to experience Ash Wednesday, it was a moving experience to put that cross-sign upon that cross-section of the Wilson community: all races, all denominations, all situations in life. There were times I was so moved I could not even say the words, but just daubed on that mark of Jesus upon each forehead.

And so we began Lent, this seven-week season of preparing for the crucifixion of Jesus. There is another custom of Lent that this Baptist has not gotten into yet, the custom of "giving up something for Lent." I reckon it has to do with remembering Jesus' sacrifice for us by making our own symbolic sacrifice for him. My friend Bob Clyde gives up Coca Cola's for Lent, which if you knew him, you'd know that is no small sacrifice. I met a lady this week who has given up chocolate for Lent, unless it happens to be a gift from someone; then all restrictions are off!

Today I offer to you a different kind of Lenten discipline for these seven weeks. I challenge you to make this season a time not for giving something up, but for inviting someone in. Let this season become a time not only to bring yourself to the cross, but also bring someone else with you to the cross. Who is there in your neighborhood, your family, your workplace, your circle of friends, who has not experienced a life-changing relationship with Jesus the Crucified One? What better time to invite him or her than during this the season when we tell the story of how Jesus went to the cross and what his death means for you and me and everyone?

To do that, you may have to give up something after all: maybe your anonymity, or maybe your fear of rejection. But what is that compared to giving up Coke or chocolate?! And besides, one out of four people who don't come to church say they would if someone would just invite them.

In short, I'm asking you to be an evangelist to someone during Lent, which means to be the bearer of good news. The simplest act of evangelism is to do what Philip did by the Galilee, to say, "Come and see." You can just say, "Come and see this community of Jesus-followers. Come and sit with me in worship." And then sweeten the deal with an invitation to lunch afterward!

Between now and Easter, every time I come to a scripture that has something to teach us about being an evangelist, I will highlight it for you, and together we will learn what we can about what it means to be evangelists.

Today's scripture is about the time that Jesus was baptized, and spent time in the wilderness, and then went home to Galilee to bring the good news. It is about his beginnings as an evangelist. A lot of people get hung up when you talk evangelism. They point to this so-called evangelist and that evangelist and say, "If that is what evangelism is, then forget it!" Well I have good news for you: you don't have to be like them to be evangelists. You only have to be like Jesus. There is no greater model of good news in the history of the world.

So how did Jesus get started as an evangelist? If we ponder how Jesus' ministry began, we will begin to understand what made him the consummate bearer of good news, and then we will begin to have some hope for ourselves...

Personally, I take courage just from the way the story begins: "*Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.*" That tells me that Jesus was no petrified saint who would never grow or never have a new thought. Jesus was always open to whatever God had in store for him next. Why else would he bother to come to John? Jesus was open to the possibility that God might do something new with Jesus through John.

Here's what that tells me about being an evangelist. An authentic evangelist will be like Jesus and never pretend to be somebody that has arrived, that is unmoved. Instead, he is always open to the next thing God has in store. She is always receptive to whatever God might teach her through someone else. He is always growing toward greater experiences of faith. I like that. I want to be an evangelist like that.

Back to the story: *Jesus "was baptized by John in the Jordan."* This has always been a bit embarrassing for Christians, because it looks as though Jesus were coming to repent of his sins and be baptized like everybody else. By the way, just the fact that the gospel includes this story speaks volumes about how trustworthy the gospel is. If the gospels had been documents of propaganda, they would never have included a story like this. But they do include it, and the point of including it is to show how Jesus, though he was without sin, was so serious about identifying with humanity that he got in line to be baptized like everybody else. John baptized some poor slob, and said "Next!" And there Jesus was. John baptized Jesus, and said, "Next!" And then some other poor soul came

forward. You see, Jesus did not hold himself up as holier than the rest of us, even though he had the right to do so. Instead, he lived right with us, right among us who need to repent so badly it would be funny if it weren't so sad. Jesus was saying, "I am one of you." Eventually he was killed as one of us, as a common criminal. On the cross the Sinless One identified even with our sins, and took them onto himself, and died for them.

This tells us volumes about what it means to be an evangelist. A true evangelist does not stand smugly over and above the rest of humanity. A real evangelist stands WITH humanity. Because the authentic evangelist does not act holier than thou, the holiness of Christ shines through.

The story tells us more: *"As soon as Jesus came up out of the waters, the heavens split open, and the Spirit came down like a dove, and a voice said, 'You are my Son, my beloved. I am delighted in you!'"* Here is the secret of the power of Jesus as evangelist. He experienced the love and the delight of his Father, who was proud to call Jesus his son. That was the great motivator in Jesus: he knew without a doubt that God loved him. He knew exactly who he was: Son of God. He knew that the Spirit of God would always be with him. From then on within him bubbled a joy that he could not contain. The love and the presence of God propelled Jesus out from those waters like a shot to spread the good news.

Before you can be an evangelist, this same thing has to happen to you. You must have a personal experience of the love of God, of the delight of God, of the presence of God. You cannot give away what you don't have; you have to experience it yourself first. For some of us, there has never been a time when we did not know the love of God. For others of us, the realization of God's love and presence came later, and hit us like warm sunshine dawning on a cold field. But however the love of God comes to us, the effect is always so powerful that we cannot keep it to ourselves. Nor will people be able to keep away from us. If within you is that overwhelming realization that the Creator of the Universe loves even you, that the Almighty Father is proud to call you his child, and that God's loving Spirit is always with you, then there will be a joy and a power in you that will pull people to you like planets to the Sun.

Well there is so much more this passage teaches us about Jesus the consummate evangelist. He goes straight from the waters to the wilderness, where he is tempted by Satan to use various shortcuts to spread the good news: the short-cut of political power, the short-cut of creating a spectacle, the short-cut of pandering to people's appetites. But Jesus will trust no power other than the power of the voice of God. Anyone who follows Jesus will do the same.

And we read that Jesus left the wilderness and went to Galilee, which was ruled by the same king that had arrested and would kill the very John who had baptized Jesus. Just so, we evangelists follow Jesus into some risky places sometimes.

And when Jesus went to Galilee, this was his message: “*The time is ripe, the kingdom of God is around the corner, turn and trust in the good news.*” (personal paraphrase) And that’s our message too.

*The time is indeed ripe*, for so many people today are so curious about God. ... *The kingdom of God is indeed just around the corner.* God is at work everywhere in this world. We do not have to step far to be caught up in what God is doing in the world. ... *Turn and trust in the good news.* The average person today thinks all he needs is just a little help from God for his already pretty good life. But the truth is, what everyone needs is to make a radical change in direction; what everyone needs is for God to perform a complete makeover on them. And the good news is God will do it.

A few weeks ago our nephew Adam was visiting us. He’d just gotten out of jail after doing a few months for getting drunk and slugging a cop. The good news was he was out of jail. The bad news was he was out of jail, for he was free to start medicating himself again with whatever substance was available. And I do mean medicate himself, because for almost as long as I’ve known him, Adam has carried within himself a mysterious deep pain that has haunted him whenever he has been sober. So, out of jail, Adam came to see us. I’d heard that he’d been thinking about baptism. So, on the spur of the moment, somewhere between the living room and the kitchen, I told him I’d heard he was thinking about it, and he had, and he had a lot of things to talk about. He had a lot of hopes and a lot of fears about being a Christian, and Adam was brutally honest about both.

Last Sunday night we went to his baptism. When he came into the waters, the minister said anyone who’s had anything to do with this man, please stand up. It felt good to stand up. In fact, I wouldn’t mind feeling like that again. Wouldn’t you?

-- Douglas E. Murray