

CONSIDERING ADOPTION

Texts on Sunday, January 13, 2013

Romans 1: 1-7; Mark 1: 1-12

Here in the beginning of the year, we are going to hear what might be called “the beginning of the gospel.” These are the voices of the New Testament’s first authors, Paul and Mark. Paul was writing 15-20 years before Mark. Mark, most experts say, set his gospel down about 70 A.D.—10, 15, even 25 years before the other gospels, Matthew, Luke, and John. Listen now to the first words of Paul’s letter to the Romans...

Paul calls Jesus “Son of God.” This sounds familiar to Christian ears. Let’s listen closer. How do you get to be someone’s son? Usually, you’re born that way. But Paul knows nothing of Jesus’ birth. Not here nor in any of his letters does Paul show interest in Jesus’ birth. His life of Jesus is painted in a few bold strokes: “This is the gospel concerning God’s son, who was a descendant of David according to the flesh, and was *declared* Son of God, according to the Holy Spirit, by resurrection from the dead.” Let’s hear that even more simply. According to Paul, Jesus was born in the ordinary way, son of a mother and a father, one of whose thousands of great-great grandfathers was King David. And Jesus became God’s Son, says Paul, by divine declaration. How did God make that declaration? By resurrection. In other words, Jesus, a plain man, was adopted—at the crucifixion-resurrection.

Now let's hear the first words of Mark's gospel ...

Mark also calls Jesus Son of God. How does Mark say Jesus came to be the Son? As the gospel opens, Jesus comes onto the scene already a grown man. No shepherds, no kings, no angels, no star, no story at all. Neither Mary nor Joseph are ever mentioned by name in Mark’s gospel. So when does Jesus become son of God? At the baptism in the Jordan, according to Mark. How? By declaration. A voice from heaven cries out the words from the coronation anthem found in Psalm 2: “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.” In other words, Jesus, a plain man, was adopted.

Parents of adopted children sometimes struggle with the question, when is the right time to tell our child that he is adopted. They want him to be ready, mature enough to really understand. Well, children? Are you ready to hear about your brother Jesus? It’s in the book. It’s been there all along. According to the earliest Christians who shared their thoughts with us, Jesus wasn't born God’s son; he was adopted.

It sure sounds like Christmas is over, doesn't it? How can we make sense of this? Of course, you could say that silence on a subject doesn't prove anything. Maybe Paul and Mark just didn't happen to hear about the special birth. Or maybe, since they couldn't make sense of why the wise men story and the shepherds story don't match up at all, they just dropped them. Not convinced? I'm not. Such arguments sound like the sorts of things we tell children when we're not ready to talk with them about how it really is. But let's be plain with one another: Whatever is true about Jesus' beginnings, certainly it was the case that in the churches Paul and Mark wrote for, the first Christians did not need narratives about the nativity to help them in faith. Crucifixion/Resurrection mattered; the rest was not necessary.

Consider this. Paul writes first. For him, Jesus becomes Son of God at the end of his earthly life. Mark writes next. For him, Jesus becomes Son of God at the beginning of his public ministry. Matthew and Luke write next. For them, Jesus becomes Son of God at birth, or even conception. John writes last. For him, "he was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we have beheld his glory, as of a father's only son." During that first century, the later the author, the earlier in time God unites with God's son. Each new generation of the early church outdoes its predecessor with a bigger story of what God was up to.

Now, some people get nervous when we speak like this about the scriptures. Talking about the birth stories as "big stories" sounds too much like what the guys at the bait shop say about the one that got away. But there is another way to listen. Fish stories are told to magnify the teller. Gospel stories are told to magnify the Lord. I cannot overstate the precious value in this distinction. As the power of the gospel for salvation first moved in the breast of humanity in those early generations, surely one generation would strive to outdo the last in praise, for surely each new generation was experiencing greater things than the former. Surely you have sometimes heard the choir outdo itself in praise, not just following a composer's markings, but marking in themselves a living experience of joy in the presence of God! It was as joy, not journalism, these stories came to be.

The two stories we have heard today say that to receive God's good news in Christ Jesus, you don't need to know about his early life, for God adopted him—by his resurrection, says Paul; in his baptism, says Mark. Considering adoption, God did not need a special star, a holy night, or a virgin birth. God needed from Jesus only the obedience of faith that led from baptism to the cross. This is all God needs from you.

My father was a preacher. When he retired, he told me that he was glad to lay down the burden of not telling his congregation all that he actually felt and believed about God and Christ and the scriptures. The difference between his faith and the ordinary tradition had seemed a gulf too great to span. But that was many decades ago. That was before my generation abandoned the church, looking for something real. Now, the continued vitality of the church demands that we speak openly about what Claremont School of Theology professor Phillip Clayton calls “the predicament of belief.”

Look. Some listening now—here or online a thousand miles away—may feel a keen dismay, on hearing that the preacher believes that the birth narratives are legends, not history; and that the man Jesus was a man with ordinary DNA, half from his mother, half from his father, whose names are perhaps also supplied by legend. Early in my ministry, a woman was so dismayed on hearing me say in a sermon that the story of Adam and Eve is not history but a myth that she left the church. That same sermon, however, drew her teen-aged daughter into the church. Faith is funny that way.

As a pastor who cares deeply for the flock (though not for the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheepish) I want you to know that it is not my aim to prove that my approach to Christian believing is right or yours wrong. I am not interested in winning an argument. I am interested in winning people to living faith. So, regardless whether you find it interesting, exciting, old hat, annoying, or troubling that the preacher finds the stories of Jesus’ adoption compelling, contrary to all church orthodoxy, notice this. If you accept and do not reject that a person can stand fully in the Christian faith, holding the scriptures differently from the way you hold them; if you are willing to take part in a church where we do not push each other out for differences, but hold each other in; where we deal with our anxieties and doubts, not judging one another, but eager to learn from one another; unafraid; confident that “our life is hid with Christ in God,” then faith becomes something completely different from just the sum of stuff we think we ought to believe. Now, faith is acting in the image of Christ, not talking about it. In a lovely essay on this subject written almost fifty years ago, sociologist Robert Bellah said, “If the vitality of the Christian church has rested in its capacity to reproduce itself in the image of Christ, it . . . can survive the collapse of dogmatic orthodoxies.” The poet W.B. Yeats said: “Humans can embody truth but they cannot know it.”

My own journey in Christian faith has had many twists and turns, but at no time since I boldly abandoned the religion when it seemed to me too small and dangerous, have I come back to the Bible as if it contained facts about things that happened that I should believe happened just because the religion required it. It doesn’t. In exchange, something wonderful has

unfolded in my relationship with the scriptures. It isn't like belief and disbelief.

When the reliability of faith-in-facts seems to fall away, it can be that a growth process is beginning. When you feel you can no longer say, "This is what we're told to believe;" when you take your crown, and will not abdicate your responsibility for everything you believe and don't believe, no matter how they hate you for stepping out; when there is no more foundation to stand on, supplied by tradition; when superstition, projection, and wishful thinking evaporate from your worldview, and no longer do you expect God to bend the laws of nature to your need, or anyone's need, to impress a dispirited people with divine power; then a great change can come.

First, though, it is an emptiness, sometimes dreadful in its silence and unresponsiveness. First, an emptiness, in which none of the heat of the world's affairs and satisfactions have any allure. I remember a time in emptiness when, at the words of assurance from a pastor—"In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven"—I would seethe under my breath in the pew—"You can't just say that and it happens." When all the seeming solid world of facts and truths falls away, the Spirit is driving you into a wilderness.

Then, if you stop looking at your watch; if you are not expecting God to keep an appointment on your calendar—for emptiness can span years; in my life, eighteen years passed in the emptiness—then may come your own experience of the Presence, of God. It is your own faith. This is how adoption takes place. Not "faith on your terms," but faith in which your whole personality can be active and is accepted in the Presence of God; and those aspects of your nature which do not serve God begin to fall away. In my own experience, there began to flow a love for the word of God abounding like the waters of a great river; a desire to turn to the living God in every page, every story, turning from none, yet never supposing any to be so small as a mere fact. Long ago, I had leapt from the platform constructed by human religion—and long later was met by winds of Holy Spirit from east and west, south and north, grace abounding. None of this, it seems, would have come to one conformed to his quiet desperation, believing whatever they told him.

Our story today says that John the Baptist promised that Jesus Christ would bring a new baptism. "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Friends, God is still looking through the windows of the church, considering adoptions. Go tell any who have never left the safe shores to wade in the water, for God's gonna trouble this water.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*