

The Story / The Heart of the Story
Sermon 2: “Jesus Ministry Begins”
March 5, 2015

PART 1:

So we have these stories about Jesus’ birth – Joseph, Mary, angels, shepherds, magi – that stuff. And then it’s kind of like they push fast forward and skip the next 30 years of Jesus. There is one scene about Jesus in the temple at the age of 12, but beside that, there’s really nothing. All that stuff on the history channel about the young Jesus is just fantasy. Wouldn’t you really like to know a little more about Jesus the kid, or Jesus the teenager, or Jesus the 20 something?

I wonder how normal he was. Can you picture Jesus as a hipster – maybe with a goatee and skinny jeans? Or how about a preppy Jesus – maybe some Polo, or L.L. Bean, and boat shoes? Or maybe Jesus would have preferred a skate style – some baggy pants, and a hoodie? Or maybe Jesus today would go for the good old southern redneck style – Carharrts or camo, boots, a ratty ball cap? Just kidding. But wouldn’t you like to know whether Jesus was a U.J. fan or whether he went for U.C.? That’s the logo for the University of Jerusalem, and that one’s for the University of Capernaum. Wouldn’t you like to know whether he had a crush on some girl in High School, or whether he wore a WWID bracelet ... “What would I do.” Just kidding.

Well, the Story just skips all that and fast forwards 30 years to when Jesus starts his public ministry. And in 3 years, in less time than one term as president, he changes the world – forever. Incredible! But God can do that! ... Now, we’re taking 31 weeks to plow our way through the storyline of the Bible. We spent 21 weeks in the Old Testament part of The Story, tracking how God chose a people through whom to fix what was broken in the world. But this people just kept messing up, big time. So eventually God let them be conquered by the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, and the Persians, and then the Greeks and the Romans. I mean even the Browns and the Redskins kept cleaning their clocks. They were tired of losing. They were desperate for a big win. They kept praying for a new quarterback – because God had promised them that a time was coming when they would have their freedom again, and their glory.

Their prophets – old dead guys now – their prophets had told them, repeatedly, that a king was coming who would make everything right – he would be incredibly powerful, and incredibly good. So they waited, and waited ... and

waited. 400 years they waited. The “in the beginning God” had said it, so it had to be so. But they kept taking beating after beating, and waiting and waiting. But they didn’t all wait the same.

- Occasionally there were messiah wannabes. These guys would come and tell people, “I’m the one you’ve been waiting for,” “I’m the chosen one.” And people would get stirred up, and some of them would follow these pretenders. And they would start a revolution. And the authorities would smack them down, and their followers would slip away, disillusioned.
- Some of the guys just became terrorists. They were the zealots. If they caught one of the Roman occupiers alone, they might just stick a knife in him. If they’d had the know-how, they’d have been planting I.E.D.s and sending their kids out as suicide bombers.
- Others of the Jews were just collaborators. If you can’t beat them, join them. Guys like the Herod: The King of the Jews, and the “friend of the Romans.” Or the Sadducees, the priests who ran the temple. They pretty much kept their power by brown nosing the enemy.
- Other Jews were just patient. They knew God would get it done, somehow, someday. Guys like the Pharisees. Our job is to stay faithful; our job is as godly as we can right now. They were kind of the conservative evangelicals of their day.
- And some of the Jews were ... preppers. They knew something big was coming down, so they’d kind of go off the grid to get ready. They were digging their bunkers, stockpiling their food. They’d be the ones carrying concealed without a license. Guys like the Essenes, of Qumran.

Well one of these preppers – at least he looked like a prepper – one of them was John. (Mark 1.6) They’d call him “John the Baptist.” He looked a lot like one of the strangest of the Old Testament prophets. He’s living out in the wilderness, wearing camel hair coats, and eating bugs. And he is called by God to start preaching. And he sounds like one of the Old Testament prophets too. (Mark 1.3) He says, “He’s coming! The messiah is coming! Get ready!” And it looked like that 400 years of silence, that 400 years of waiting, was coming to an end.

(Mark 1.4) It says that John telling the Jews to repent and be baptized, for the forgiveness of their sins. Now that was just weird to these Jews. They believed in baptism, but baptism was for Gentiles, it was for the new converts, not for those who were Jews already. They believed that baptism was for the forgiveness of sins. But they were already forgiven, they were already “in,” they were already God’s people. And John was preaching this at them!

(Mark 1.5) And it says that he was drawing huge crowds. Some of them were probably just curious. Others were probably just there to mock and laugh. But some of them – Jews – were confessing their sins (because they had them, plenty of them), and they were getting baptized.

But all that repentance and baptism stuff was not John's biggest deal. (Mark 1.7-8) He kept saying, "He's coming! The one we've been waiting for is coming – he's way bigger than me! In fact I'm not even worthy to get on my knees and help him take off his sandals! When I plunk you in the water, God forgives your sins. When he baptizes, you'll get the Holy Spirit too ... or fire." Because what you do with him, will determine what God does with you. Do you buy that? What you do with Jesus will determine what God does with you.

Now here's where the story gets good. (John 1.35-36) One day John is standing there with two of his disciples and he sees Jesus walking by. And John says, "Look guys, look at him. That's him! That's the ... lamb of God. That's the guy who will take away the sins of the world." Now that's just weird! John doesn't say, "That's the king we've been waiting for." Or "That's the big guy, that's the messiah I have been talking about." No. Instead he says, "He's the lamb of God, he's the one who will bleed for you!" (John 1.37) But the disciples got it. They knew that in some strange way, John was identifying their Messiah.

And here's where the story gets really good. This is weird! (Matthew 3.13-14) It says that Jesus went down from Galilee to the Jordan River to be baptized, to be dunked under the water by John. And John is freaked out! "This isn't right. You should be baptizing me; I have no business baptizing you. This is wrong!" (Matthew 3.15) You see, Jesus getting baptized makes no sense, to us. John was out there baptizing people who were repenting, for the forgiveness of their sins. Jesus was the only one ever who didn't need any repenting. He had no sins to forgive. I need to repent, I've got sins to forgive; you need to repent, you've got sins to forgive. But Jesus was not just a man, he was the Son of God; and he was the only one ever to walk on this earth flawlessly.

So what was Jesus doing? Why did he need to be baptized? Was he just trying to tell everybody who was watching that this John the Baptist was doing God's work, that they needed to listen to him? Or, was Jesus taking his first step as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world? Was he bearing our sins somehow as he was buried in that water? I don't know. What I do know from this story is God wanted it done. Jesus says to John, "It's not about what you think is right, or not; it's about what God wants. So, get it done!"

So John did it; he plunked him. (Matthew 3.16) And when Jesus came up out of the water John saw something, and he heard something that blew his mind. He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and landing on Jesus. And he heard a voice from heaven say, "This one, this one is my Son; this is the Son I love." I don't know how John knew that that dove was the Holy Spirit; and I don't know how John knew that that voice was God's voice. But God has a way of making these things crystal clear when he wants to.

Listen guys, the first thing Jesus does is to get baptized – and he didn't even need it, like we do. So why do we push back when he tells us to get baptized? He tells us to, you know. (Matthew 28.18-19) Jesus' last words in the Gospel of Matthew were these: "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth." So when I speak, you need to listen. "Now go make disciples (that's to us), go make Jesus followers of all the nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit." So we do. We do whatever we can to bring people face to face with Jesus, to encourage them to do life with God. And we urge people to start off their life with God by following his example, and his orders – to get baptized.

We think it's huge! That's why this baptistery is so big and so prominent in this room. We believe this is a place where God and men touch. When it's done, from the heart, we believe it's the final part of coming to Jesus. When you go under that water, it's kind of like you are burying the old. When you come up out of the water, it's kind of like you are starting all over – you are clean, you are forgiven, you are sealed for God by his Holy Spirit. It's amazing stuff!

We're going to have a baptism day next week. A lot of folks are kind of ABB Jesus followers: all but baptism. You've done everything Jesus wants you to do to start doing life with him, except baptism. Well it's time to get it done. Others of you haven't even started yet. You know it's the right thing to do; you've felt God nudging you, but you've been holding back. Guys, just do it. It never pays to put off doing the right thing.

If you are interested in participating in our baptism day next week, we'd love to talk to you. I believe Todd is going to invite you to talk to one of us after the service today; we'll be hanging around up front. Just to give you an idea of what we're talking about, I want you to watch their faces during this next song

...

PART 2:

(Matthew 4.1) Okay, if you read chapter 23 of The Story last week, you'll remember that after his baptism, Jesus was led by God into the wilderness to have a mano y mano with Satan. Which is kind of like what happens with a lot with us. Not on that scale, of course. But here's what happens: as soon as you make a commitment to God, Satan will come after you ... and he often wins. As soon as you try to take a step closer to God, to step up your life with God, Satan will try to knock you back. I've felt it happen with me; and I've seen it happen with a lot of you.

It's really hard to get good numbers.

- I read about one denomination in 1995 that reported 384,057 decisions for Jesus (a great number), but only 22,983 stayed connected to a church (a lousy number). That's a 6% retention rate: 94% of the people who made a decision for Jesus, drifted away. Satan is very, very good at what he does.
- Another denomination tracked 11,500 churches in 1991: 294,784 decisions for Jesus. That's really good! Two years later they could only find 14,337 of those people still connected to the church – about 5%. 95% drifted away. That's awful! Satan is very, very good at what he does.
- Jon did some calculating for us. Jon tracked 113 baptisms here at Capital City over the past 3 years – not a great number (we could do a whole lot better), but it's not bad. 35 of those we baptized are no longer active in church, as best we can tell. Now, that's pretty good ... and it's downright awful. 35 of the people who gave their lives to Jesus – these guys stood in front of you and called Jesus the Lord of their life – it's looks like they have drifted away. Does that break your heart? It breaks his!

Because, Satan is very, very good at what he does. If you try to take a step towards Jesus, Satan will try to knock you back. And way too often he wins. But, Satan lost this one, with Jesus. And after Jesus gives Satan a beat down in the desert, he goes to church. (Luke 4.16) Luke 4: I love what it says here; don't miss this little piece. It says, "When Jesus came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went AS USUAL to the synagogue on the Sabbath..." Did you get it? He went – "as usual." Do you want to tell me why Jesus, the Son of God, needed to go to church? I mean, if anyone had the right to say, "I think I'll sleep in today," or "go to the lake," or "do a little TV church," I think it would have been Jesus. Guys, either he was trying to show us what is important, or it was that important to him too. Either way, doing church, connecting with other Jesus followers, committing to weekly worship together is part of how God keeps us from drifting away. That "as usual" should include us too!

Well, one of the ways they did church back then was to allow a visiting teacher to preach, or to read. And I suspect Jesus asked specifically for the Isaiah scroll. Because in it was ... his mission statement. It's right there in the prophet Isaiah. (Luke 4.18-19) Jesus unrolls the scroll and he reads these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (in fact, they had literally seen God's Spirit come upon Jesus as a dove at his baptism), for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor (and not just the physically poor – especially to the spiritually poor). He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released (and not just the physical captives, but those of us who have been captured by our sin), that the blind will see (and not just the physically blind, but those of us who can't see a way out of our messes), that the oppressed will be set free (that's us, guys), and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."

I mean, everybody is staring at him; there is this unnatural quiet, everybody is holding their breath. (Luke 4.21) And Jesus says, "Guys, that's today; that's right here, right now; that's why I am here. It's on!"

And Jesus goes out and starts blowing their minds. He starts doing things like changing water into wine, and healing the deaf, and the blind, and the lepers, and the lame. He starts telling storms to quiet down – and they do. He starts raising the dead. Would that get your attention? And he starts teaching them like no one had ever taught before. The claims that he made were so outrageous, the demands that he made were so over the top, the promises he made were so astonishing...

And the crowds kept growing. And their hopes kept growing. "This has got to be the new quarterback God promised! This has to be the messiah we've been waiting for! The revolution we have been expecting has got to be now. I mean, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Browns, and even the Redskins have been kicking our tails. With this Jesus out front, it's our turn now! You see, they thought their messiah would build them a physical kingdom, with physical power, and physical authority.

(John 6.10-11) So there is this incident when this huge crowd is hungry. And Jesus' disciples scrounge up 5 loaves of bread, and 2 fish – to feed 5000 guys, and their ladies, and their kids. That's about a crumb apiece. And yet as they pass the plate around, the people just keep eating. Guys, if you think something like that is impossible for God, then your God is way too small. He's not the God of The Story.

(John 6.15) Well this crowd gets all excited. Looks like Jesus was pretty much everything they wanted in a king. He could feed them, he could heal them; he

had to be able to kick some Roman tail. If I follow this Jesus, he's going to heal my kid when my kid gets sick; he's going to fix my checkbook, when I get stupid and overspend; he's going to fix my marriage, which just isn't working out the way I think it should; he's going to get me that job I want; and he's going to keep the snow off our parking lot. I mean, if Jesus has all that power, he ought to fix some things for us, don't you think?

And Jesus wouldn't let them, crown him king – their kind of king. It says he just slipped away. And here's what happens: when life gets hard, and we count on God to fix it for us ... our way ... he inevitably, it seems, disappoints us, it seems. Have you ever been disappointed by God? You ever been inclined to drift away from God, because life isn't working out the way you think it should, as a Jesus follower? He's going to disappoint you, if you think he is bound in any way to back your agenda.

He disappointed them. (Matthew 21.8-9) It won't be long till Jesus makes his dramatic entrance into Jerusalem – and they are all out there excited and celebrating and cheering. They are taking off their coats and pulling branches off palm trees, so their King's feet don't touch the dirt. They are thinking, "Finally! Finally he's going to seize the throne. Finally he's going to fix things for us. And when he didn't ... within a week a lot of these same people are telling the Romans to crucify him; and the rest ... just drift away. You see, we are all prone to drift away, especially when God doesn't behave himself, as we think a God ought to behave. We kind of forget, a lot, who is God.

One more piece of this story that is extra weird. Remember John – John the Baptist? Well, he was one of those guys who just said it if it needed to be said. (Matthew 14.3-4) And John kind of called the king out when the king stole his brother's wife. Ticked the king off; ticked his wife off worse – which can be a whole lot more dangerous than ticking off some husband. She had him arrested; eventually she's going to have him beheaded. This beheading stuff has been going on for a long time over there.

(Matthew 11.2-3) Well, while John is sitting in prison, waiting, he sends a message to Jesus – and it is a really, really weird message. He says, "Are you really the Messiah we've been waiting for? Or is there someone else coming? Come on Jesus! What are you doing? What are you waiting for?"

Now, remember: John and Jesus are cousins. (Luke 1.41) In fact, before either one of them had been born, when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, went to visit Elizabeth, pregnant with John – it says, "John leaped in his mama's womb." You see, John knew who Jesus was before he was even born! He knew the

story of how Mary got pregnant. (John 1.29) He had been called by God to prepare the way for his cousin. When he saw Jesus, he told his disciples: “That one is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” When he baptized Jesus, he saw the Holy Spirit come down on Jesus in the form of a dove, he heard the voice of God identifying Jesus as his Son. Are you serious? This John asks Jesus, “Are you really the one we’ve been waiting for, or is someone else coming?” (Matthew 11.11) I mean, Jesus told his guys that his cousin, John, was the greatest man to have ever lived, yet. And this John doubts Jesus?!

I’m telling you guys, there is something in us that nudges us toward doubting God. It’s in all of us. We all have this natural propensity, this natural drift, to lean away from God. The theologians call it “depravity.” Let’s just say, it’s not easy for us to let God be God.

And sometimes that inclination to doubt God ratchets way up when we are facing death. I’ve seen people get terrified when they realize their time is really short. Randy tells me that Al Rudolf was the finest elder he’s ever been around. He died last year. Just before he died he asked Randy, “Is all this real?” Are you serious – Al had these doubts? And I’ve seen people really struggle with God when someone they love is dying. “God, if you are really there – fix him!” And usually God is quiet.

It really happens whenever times get hard, and God doesn’t behave like we think God should. “If you are really there, God, I could use some help right now.” “If you are really there God, I wish you would just say something, or do something.”

And Satan uses whatever he can, to nudge us away from God. He tries knocking you back when you try to take a step towards Jesus. He tries knocking you back when life gets hard. He tries knocking you back when God disappoints you ... when he doesn’t behave the way we think God should.

You been there?

- Maybe you are sitting there, and you feel God’s nudge. It’s time to surrender your life to him; it’s time to be baptized. And you start kicking back – “I think I’m doing okay; I think I can make it work without that baptism part.” And you start justifying your disobedience, and you start drifting.
- Or maybe you are kind of getting tired of doing church. And you are telling yourself, I can do okay, with God, without all this. And you justify your disobedience, and you start drifting.

- Or maybe there is a girl, or a guy who is tugging at you. And you know that it wouldn't be God-honoring, but it is pretty easy to convince yourself, with Satan's help, that God doesn't care that much about how you feel, and he's kind of an old prude. So you lean away from God.
- Or maybe there is some sin: something on the internet you're drawn to, something you shouldn't be putting in your mind, or something you shouldn't be putting in your mouth, and you are inclined to lean toward it, more than you are inclined to lean towards God.
- Or maybe God just isn't behaving right. He won't fix your body, he won't fix your kid, he won't fix your marriage, he won't fix your checkbook, he won't fix whatever. God disappoints you, and Satan uses that disappointment to drive a wedge between you and God.

Are you really the one, Jesus? Or is someone else coming? Guys, if the greatest man who ever lived had those kind of doubts, you will too, I expect. Lee Strobel said, "There are two kinds of Christians: those who are going to doubt Jesus, from time to time, and those who are brain dead." You decide which group you want to be part of. If you never question your faith in God, then you probably don't have much faith in God. So what do you do with your doubts?

(Matthew 11.2) Well, John did something really cool. He took his doubts to Jesus. You seem when we doubt we tend to lean away from God; when John doubted he leaned in. Isn't that cool! John sends his doubts in a message to Jesus. (Matthew 11.4-5) And Jesus sends this message back: "You go back and tell John what's happening. The blind are seeing (and not just the physically blind), the lame are walking (and not just the physically lame), the lepers are cured, and the deaf hear, the dead are being raised to life (and not just the physically dead); the Good News is being preached to the poor. Do you remember my mission statement – from the prophet Isaiah? It's getting done. Maybe not the way you expected it, but it's getting done God's way."

And then Jesus said something you need to hear. (Matthew 11.6) He said, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble, blessed is anyone who does not turn away from God because of me. Wow! Blessed is anyone who does not lose faith because Jesus disappoints them. And he will disappoint you, whenever you think it's his job to back your agenda.

And here's the deal guys, it's not about starting strong (baptism), it's about finishing strong. And that's going to require trusting God when his path is not the one you like.

I don't care if you have doubts. I do care if you lean towards Jesus with your doubts, instead of leaning away from God because of your doubts. And it doesn't bother me that you are going to be disappointed with God. That's going to come, until we give up our agenda, and accept his – and that's so hard! But it's worth it.

I find my strength, I find my home, I find my help – in Christ alone.
When fear assails, when darkness falls, I find my peace – In Christ alone.