

March 19, 2006

## **The Formative Years** **Matthew 3:1-17**

As Christians we are called upon to live according to the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus tells us that he is the way to life, life more abundant. We find this way through his teaching and through the way he lived. For now we will attempt to study how Jesus lived to find the example that we would follow. As important to our life as his teachings are, our current study will be limited, as much as possible, to the way he lived. We will start with the book of Matthew and take each and every event, one by one, to see if and how it can make our life more meaningful.

We know that Jesus visited the Temple when he was twelve years old. We know that he was baptized by John when he was around 30 years old. Exactly what happened in those important 18 formative years we can only guess. It will be an intelligent guess because we know so much about the times and

culture of that period.

We know Jesus could read because we are told he read from the book of Isaiah in the Synagogue. We know Jesus could write, which was quite an accomplishment in those days, because he wrote in the dirt when the crowd attempted to stone the woman caught in adultery. We know that Jesus was familiar with the Old Testament because he quoted it so many times in his ministry. From these “we knows” we can assume that some of these 18 years were spent in school or study.

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus followed in Joseph’s footsteps as a carpenter. We can assume that following this trade he learned the value of work; the reward of a job well done.

Mark refers to Jesus as a tekton. A tekton was more than a carpenter. A tekton was a craftsman who could build a wall or a chair or a boat or even a house. In Matthew Jesus is quoted as saying “*My yoke is easy.*” As the Greek puts it, “*My yoke is well-fitting.*” Important in a culture where the hard hauling and

the plowing was done by oxen hitched to the wagon or the plow by means of a yoke fixed to the oxen's shoulders. To be of optimum value to both the oxen and the pulling power the yoke had to be well-fitting, the work of a master craftsman.

We can only guess at Jesus' physical appearance. He must have been a man of broad and muscular shoulders and a heavy and muscular chest. In those days a carpenter didn't have the luxury of going to Home Depot for the lumber he needed for a project. He had to go up into the hills, into the woods, select and down a tree, carry it home and there fashion the boards that he would need. Pretty hard work. Yesterday I split a hickory log to get wood for barbeque. Believe me, it's hard work.

When you consider the time it took to get from tree to chair we realize that a carpenter had to be a persistent fellow, not one easily discouraged. Here was a person who formulated a purpose, then a plan and stuck to it.

During these 18 formative years Jesus was learning the meaning of family life and the importance of the family circle.

That he addressed God as father is a compliment to Joseph. To Jesus it seemed that the word “father” was the most natural name for God. He must have learned the meaning of that word growing up in the presence of Joseph.

It is said that Martin Luther hesitated to pray the Lord’s Prayer and to say “*Our Father*” because his own father had been so “*stern, so unbending, so unsympathetic.*”

Jesus did not grow up in an ascetic world of a monk. He grew up in a home with all of its responsibilities and cross currents. His formative years were lived as a “*family man.*”

I do not know what the life expectancy was in Jesus’ day but I am confident it wasn’t long. Famine, disease, lack of sanitation, few medical facilities, all of which would have shortened the life span to somewhere in the 40’s or early 50’s. At the age of 30 Jesus was well on his way to the grave. He spent the greater part of his productive years preparing for his ministry and ordeal. The lesson that the life of Jesus brings us out of these formative 18 years is that we are to be prepared; we

are to lay down the foundations that will take us through the troubles and perils that we face.

One important foundation that is apparent from Jesus' formative years concerns parents and the raising of responsible members of the family. If foundations are not laid down during the formative years they may never be laid. We neglect our young people at our peril. Tomorrow may be too late.

One foundation that shines through these 18 years is that of responsibility. The responsibility to take an active position in the productivity of society.

I gather that in these years of preparation Jesus laid his intelligent foundations. Now, as then, it was most important that the individual develop intelligent foundations. How else to combat the whirls of doctrines and falsehoods we are exposed to?

While it is the primary responsibility of parents to provide their children with intelligent foundations, it doesn't stop there. It is the responsibility of every individual in our society to see

that the youth of the day have the opportunity to a decent and demanding education.

Jesus brings another example of one who took advantage of the opportunities of laying down foundations that would carry him through the ordeals of his ministry and suffering. It is never too late to build what is left of life on the pillars of prudence, fortitude, temperance, justice, faith, hope and charity.

The Son of God prepared himself for the world by first taking care of that which was closest to him, home and family. As Dr. Barclay puts it, *“The Son of God, when he came into this world, prepared himself to save the world by serving in a home.”*

On the threshold of Jesus’ ministry his cousin John came out of the desert calling for men to repent and be baptized. Baptism was not unknown in Jesus’ day. It was an expression in the change in lifestyle, in belief, of a newness.

Baptism or washing, was an important rite in the mystery religions of Greece. The unusual program was for the Priest to

bring the initiate to the baths, demand pardon of the gods, then wash and purify the body.

The Jews required three things of the proselyte entering the Jewish faith: circumcision, baptism and sacrifice. The baptism was carried out in the presence of three witnesses. The candidate's nails and hair was cut. He was stripped naked and completely immersed in water. The essence of the Law was read to him. He confessed his sins to the witnesses. Following blessings he emerged from the waters as a Jew. It was said that he was born again, "*A child of one day.*" The baptism completely severed him from his past.

This baptism was for gentiles entering into the Jewish faith, not for the sons of Abraham, though it may have been practiced by some of the Jewish sects.

Out of the desert came John calling on these descendants of Abraham to repent and be baptized. Unheard of! The Jews were God's chosen ones as a matter of right. There was absolutely no need for a Jew to be baptized. It was said that

God put an angel at the gates of Hell with instruction that if any circumcised man showed up he was to be turned away.

Yet these Jews came by the hundreds. Why? Maybe because there was something missing in their life; maybe because they longed for a change; maybe because they thought this act of baptism would hasten the coming of the Redeemer; maybe because they saw in John the return of Elijah prophesied to be the forerunning of the Messiah. Whatever, they came.

The big question; why would Jesus, the sinless man, come? Tradition has it that Jesus was baptized to please his mother. Everyone else was doing it. Mass hysteria much like that evidenced by the crowds that Billy Graham brought out of the stands to the altar rail.

Perhaps Jesus saw this as the moment he had prepared for. It was the moment when he must put behind family and friends and take on his mission of salvation.

Perhaps he wanted some assurance that what he was to do was what God wanted him to do, God's will. Perhaps it was in



this moment that God offered and Jesus accepted the task of Savior of the World.

Here we need to read the 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

I like the idea that Jesus went into the water as all man carrying with him the sins to which humanity is heir to; that he came out of the water as God's anointed one and that he left this life all God. The message is that Jesus went to be baptized seeking the assurance that God's way was his way.

This presents us with direction as we seek the answer to the question of what do I put first? Is my first priority the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Self? How we answer this question is of utmost importance as to the way we live. Just as Jesus' baptism changed him from a carpenter to the Savior of the World so we can change from selfishness to servant; from seeking service to serving. We probably don't have the strength to do this on our own and we don't have to. We can make this change with God's strength and God's help. I call this the power to become, the power to be all we were created to be. It

just takes a little desire and determination to put God first.

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### Pastor's Message

*The saddest anti-climax which can come to any man is to have labored over a lifetime for certain things, to have gotten them, and then find out that they were not worth the struggle.*

*The most important effort a young person can make is to see what accomplishments in life are worth the struggle and what are not.*

*The fundamental truth in this area is that satisfaction in living is an inward experience, and outward circumstances, and achievements are relative. Life is like a game of checkers: success and failure, satisfaction and disappointment are in the heart and mind of the player. The position of the counters on the squares during the course of the game and at the end are only outward expressions of processes within the player.*

*To begin with, one should choose goals within reasonable possibility of attainment. It is indeed noble to say, "Not failure, but low aim is crime." But it is important to realize the reality of one's limitations and to discern between courage and foolhardiness.*

*To be absorbed in, to enjoy what one is doing yields perpetual satisfaction in living. To be engaged in an uncongenial task over a lifetime is like a blind Samson grinding corn in the mill of the Philistines.*

*Again, to take pride in a work well done is a lasting reward. Stevenson held to the principle of "laboring in all things to the point of honor."*

*Finally, to undergird all the actions of life with a high idealism makes the struggle worthwhile. The sense of having been obedient to an ideal is beyond the power of time or events to tarnish or dissipate.*

*"To have striven," says Sir William Osler, "to have made an effort, to have been true to certain ideals—this alone is worth the struggle."*

#### PRAYER

*Give me the discernment to know, O Lord, what is worth the struggle, and what is not. Amen.*