

THE "REAL" JESUS ALIGNED WITH...

LUKE 3:1-22

(SECOND IN SERIES)

FEBRUARY 9, 1986

We are looking to Jesus and looking for Jesus in this sermon series. Last week I tried to make the point that it takes a search to find the "real" Jesus for he is hidden by centuries of culture, philosophy and theology. It is crucial for us to have an accurate picture of Jesus, for Christianity is an historical religion. Jesus reveals God to us. Jesus is our authority. We can find truth in other religions and other spiritual disciplines, but the criterion by which we evaluate and choose is our understanding of Jesus. As Christians we accept the revelation of God seen in Jesus Christ as normative. Therefore, taking the benefits of archaeological and biblical research of this century, we seek to find the "real" Jesus.

Outside of his visit to the temple in Jerusalem when he was twelve years old, we know little of Jesus until he began his ministry as recorded in the gospels. There are legends about the intervening years and conjectures, but there is little that we know. Therefore, we begin our search with the biblical record. What is the first event in Jesus' ministry? According to all the gospels, it was Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist.

The question that has rarely been asked is: why did Jesus align himself with John the Baptist? Considering the many groups active in Judea and Galilee at that time, considering the many voices teaching, recruiting, seeking to influence and lead, why did Jesus choose to join John the Baptist's movement? We know by reading the gospels that he differed from John the Baptist in several respects, but basically, Jesus made a very strong statement on the nature of his mission by aligning himself with John the Baptist. Biblical scholars are only beginning to understand the significance of this act.

Jesus made a significant choice. From among several alternatives, Jesus chose John the Baptist. It will be helpful and revealing for us to learn what was going on when Jesus lived. In order to discover what Jesus was trying to achieve, we must look at his contemporaries, what they were seeking to achieve, and how they differed from John the Baptist. Let's look at what was happening.

The Romans colonized Judea, Samaria, Galilee and the northern regions in 63 B.C. The colonial policy of the Romans included the appointment of local rulers. Herod the Great was appointed King of the Jews. Jesus was born during the reign of this Herod. In 4 B.C, Herod the Great died. This fact causes scholars to date the birth of Jesus sometime before 4 B.C. After Herod the Great died, the kingdom was divided into three with his three sons each receiving a territory. Herod Archelaus was given Judea and Samaria. Herod Antipas was given Galilee, and Herod Philip was given the northern regions.

The people, however, were restless. They resented the Roman rule, especially the idea of taxation. You will remember that Joseph and Mary found themselves in Bethlehem when Jesus was born because they were forced to return to Joseph's home for the census. The purpose of the census was not just to

count the people, but to formulate the basis of taxation. Like our American ancestors who opposed paying taxes to England without representation, the Jews opposed paying taxes to Rome. Tension rose, tax collectors were scorned and hated.

Herod Archelaus, the ruler of Judea (the province in which Jerusalem was located) and Samaria (the next province north of Judea), was unable to cope with the restless discontent, so Rome deposed Herod Archelaus and sent a Roman procurator by the name of Pontius Pilate to govern Judea and Samaria. Jesus was about 12 years old at this time. The other Herods remained in place. You might recall how Jesus was sent by Pilate to be tried by Herod Antipas who was the ruler of Galilee which included Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. But, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

The coming of Pontius Pilate was the beginning of direct Roman rule, and the appointment set off an open rebellion. The leader of the rebellion was a man named Judas the Galilean (not Judas Iscariot). He objected to Roman taxation on religious grounds. The Romans quickly squelched the rebellion and, as a warning to the people, crucified two thousand of the rebels. Consequently, when Jesus began his ministry, there was much tension in the air.

Let's look at some of the movements and factions when Jesus began his ministry by choosing to be baptized by John. There were the Zealots. The Zealots believed in the violent overthrow of Roman rule. They were an underground movement and sporadically engaged in Guerrilla warfare. They were constantly harassing the Romans which caused the Romans to be on guard and temperamental. The Zealot movement was essentially a religious movement. They believed that the Jews were God's chosen nation, that God was their King, their only Lord, and that their land and its resources belonged solely to God. To accept the Romans as their masters would have been an act of unfaithfulness to God. To pay taxes to Caesar would be giving to Caesar what belonged to God. They were zealous in their defiance. But, notice, Jesus did not align himself with the Zealots.

The Pharisees were the prestigious and authoritative teachers of the written and the oral law. Six thousand Pharisees refused to sign the oath of allegiance to the Roman Emperor, but they differed from the Zealots in that they refused to take up arms against Rome and they paid their taxes, though under protest. They believed that a future Messiah would be sent by God to liberate them from the Romans. The principal concern of the Pharisees was reform. They believed God had abandoned them to Rome because of the people's unfaithfulness to the law and the traditions. They separated themselves from all those who were not faithful to the law. In fact, the word 'pharisees' means 'the separate ones.' They believed that God rewards those who keep the law and punishes those who do not. The Pharisees believed in an after-life, in the resurrection of the dead. You might recall that the apostle Paul was a Pharisee. But, notice, Jesus did not align himself with the Pharisees.

The Essenes were even stricter than the Pharisees in their striving for perfection. Many of them separated themselves completely from society and lived celibate and ascetic lives in the desert. The Essenes rejected everyone who did not belong to their sect. Love and respect were reserved for the members of their group--the sons of light. They practiced strict separation and rigorous discipline because they believed that the end of the world was

near. They were preparing for the coming of the Messiah and for the great war in which they as the sons of light would destroy the sons of darkness, the armies of Satan. The first of the sons of darkness to be destroyed would be the Romans. The Essenes were as warlike as the Zealots but they felt the timing was not yet right. They were waiting for the day of the Lord. Notice, Jesus did not align himself with the Essenes.

The Sadducees were also called the chief priests, elders and scribes. They were the conservatives. They upheld the ancient traditions and rejected all new ideas like the resurrection of the dead and the possibility of life after death. They believed that rewards and punishments were to be received in this life. Therefore, they believed in expediency and collaborated with the Romans to maintain the status quo. They were the wealthy class. Notice, Jesus did not align himself with the Sadducees.

In the midst of all of these movements, there was one man who stood out, different from all of them. John the Baptist was a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, and like many of the Old Testament prophets, he was a prophet of doom and destruction. The other movements and groups of that day looked forward to the "age to come" when the faithful would triumph over their enemies. John prophesied doom and the destruction of their nation.

John's style of life (he lived in the desert, dressed in camel's hair with a leather girdle, ate locusts and wild honey), his way of speaking and his message were a conscious revival of the traditions of the prophets. A prophecy in the biblical sense is not a prediction of the future, but a warning. John's warning--his prophecy--was that God was angry with his people and planned to punish them. God was about to enter history and destroy their nation. John pictured this destruction as a great forest fire before which the vipers flee, in which trees and chaff are burned and in which people will be engulfed as in a baptism of fire. He was not talking about an after-life hell, but a hell on earth. God's fiery judgment will be executed, according to John, by a human being, the "one who is to come." "He," John said, "will baptize you with fire."

But, if the people will repent and be baptized, they will be forgiven and spared from the future punishment. It is significant that the repentance, that is, the change of heart, is not a ritual act, or keeping petty laws; but, repentance means a change in the way you live. As we read in our lesson from Luke, John said, "Bear fruits that befit repentance." When the multitudes asked John what they should do, he told them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him share." Tax collectors were told to "collect no more than what is due." Soldiers were told, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation." Conversion, the turning to God, is a matter of morality and loving neighbor.

John the Baptist especially differed from the other movements and groups of his day by including all the people in his preaching. John did not found a sect or organize a separate group of the faithful. John warned everyone. John invited everyone to repentance and baptism. He preached to scribes, Pharisees, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors and soldiers. John even challenged the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas, and it cost him his life. John criticized Herod for divorcing his wife to marry the wife of his half-brother, and for all other crimes Herod had committed. John was arrested and beheaded because he dared to speak out against King Herod.

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Notice, Jesus did not align himself with the Zealots, Pharisees, Essenes or the Sadducees. Jesus did not align himself with the rebels, or the law-abiding and law-promoting citizens, or the wealthy, or the separatists. But, Jesus did align himself with John the Baptist. As Albert Nolan in his book, Jesus Before Christianity, puts it, "John the Baptist was the only man in that society who impressed Jesus." (page 17) John warned the people of an impending disaster and called for a change of heart and life-style.

The fact that Jesus aligned himself with John the Baptist has much to say about Jesus' mission and message. Did Jesus believe that an unprecedented catastrophe was coming? Perhaps we have not really understood Jesus' message. Continued next week...