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January 12, 2020
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

The Gospel According To....

As I was preparing the sermon this week, I conducted an internet search on the phrase, “The gospel according to...” Here are the top ten results: (1) Jesus – that’s a relief, I’m glad he came out on top; (2-4) Luke, Matthew, Mark – all ones I expected; (5) Biff – I’d never heard of that one; further research showed Biff to be the main character in a novel titled *Lamb: The Gospel according to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal*; (6) John – good, we’re back to the Bible; (7) Andre – turns out this is a documentary about a man in the fashion industry; (8) Peanuts – I’d heard of this book, it’s from my childhood.; (9) Thomas – writings that didn’t make it into the Bible; (10) Water – this is the name of a music album released last year.

My curiosity piqued, I checked the Salina Public Library to see what they might have in stock and came up with five more to add to the list: (11) Oprah; (12) Mary; (13) Tolkien; (14) Science Fiction; (15) The Simpsons. Wow! That’s a lot of good news from a wide variety of sources.

You may be wondering what led me to this particular search. It comes from the great leap in time we experience at the beginning of the year. Two weeks ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Last week we looked at the story of wise men visiting a toddler. And this week Jesus is a man ready to be baptized and begin his ministry.

It makes sense to wonder what happened in the years between toddlerhood and manhood. What do the biblical gospel writers tell us that could help us understand the account of Jesus’ baptism and the events that happen in the next few years? We don’t find much in the Bible about the gap between birth and baptism. (And after reading some book reviews, I’m not sure that I want to read Biff’s account.) However, as we consider Jesus’ baptism and the ministry that is to come, it’s helpful to learn more about all four of the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life.

We find stories of the life of Jesus in the first four books of the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As was made evident in the internet search, these books don’t actually have one word titles. The complete titles include four more words: the Gospel according to....: The Gospel According to Matthew, The Gospel According to Mark, The Gospel According to Luke, The Gospel According to John.

Reading the full titles reminds us that each of these accounts of the gospel – the good news from God – was written by a particular person at a particular time for a particular audience. Each of the writers tells the story of Jesus’ life and ministry. However, each one emphasizes different aspects and includes different combinations of events sometimes told using different timelines.

Consulting a Bible that includes an introduction to each book helps demonstrate what I’m talking about. Here’s what’s written in one Bible about Matthew: ¹ *Matthew’s main purpose is to demonstrate to his Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah. He quotes the Old Testament often and uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven” frequently.*

We read from Matthew a lot this Christmas so I hope this sounds familiar to you. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, starting with Abraham, continuing on to David, and

¹ All introductions come from *NRSV Reference Bible with the Apocrypha*, Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1993.

ending with Jesus, who is called the Messiah. When he recounts Joseph's dream, he quotes a prophecy from Isaiah about the Messiah and indicates that Jesus fulfills that prophecy. Matthew tells the story of the magi who travel a great distance to find the child who has been born king of the Jews. He also tells about the great lengths to which Herod goes to try to get rid of this potential rival and the miraculous way Jesus' life is spared when Joseph obeys instructions that come to him in several dreams.

Now let's look at Mark: *The book of Mark stresses the facts and actions of Jesus rather than his words or sayings. Although it is the shortest of the four Gospels, it is often the most detailed. Jewish customs are carefully explained for Roman readers. One of Mark's purposes was to demonstrate the deity of Christ. He tells the stories of Christ's ministry, especially his miracles. Mark spends one-third of the book telling the events of Christ's last week on earth, ending with his death and resurrection.*

Mark doesn't describe the birth or childhood of Jesus at all. He gets right into the beginnings of Jesus' ministry.

Moving on to Luke: *Luke tells us in the first four verses that he wrote this Gospel to give Theophilus (likely a government official) the true and complete story of Jesus' life. One of his interests in writing this book was to show that Jesus loved all kinds of people. In the parables especially, he wrote about the poor and oppressed. The theme of joy is felt throughout the book, as Christ's coming brought joy and the hope of salvation to a sinful world.*

Luke gives us the most detailed account of the birth of Jesus, the one familiar to many people. In the first chapter, he recounts the predictions of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John and Mary's pregnancy with Jesus. Elizabeth confirms the blessedness of Mary's pregnancy. Mary sings a song of praise. John the Baptist is born and named. And Zechariah prophesies about his son and the coming savior.

The second chapter of Luke contains the familiar story of Jesus' birth that we read here every Christmas Eve. Luke tells about the baby laid in a manger and the angels and the shepherds. The angels proclaim that this baby is a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Luke also tells about Mary and Joseph taking baby Jesus to Jerusalem and presenting him at the temple. The specialness of this child is confirmed by Simeon and Anna, both of whom declare Jesus to be the Messiah who had been promised to the children of Israel.

At the end of chapter two, Luke tells about the time twelve-year old Jesus traveled to Jerusalem with his parents. Jesus is so engrossed in his discussions with the teachers in the temple – listening to them and asking them questions – that he doesn't leave town when his parents do. When they find him after anxiously searching for three days, he tells them they shouldn't be surprised that he is in the temple. He's simply doing what he's supposed to do. This is the only story from Jesus' childhood that we find in the gospels.

Let's finish our survey with the Gospel According to John: *The writer states his main goal clearly in 20.31: "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah." He may have had Greek readers in mind. Along with this evangelistic purpose, John wanted to make clear to his readers both that Jesus was God and that Jesus had come in the flesh.*

We don't find a clear birth story in John or any description of Jesus' childhood. What we do find is a poetic description of the Word becoming flesh and living among us. The chart provides a comparison of a few of the features of the four Gospels. It helps to illustrate the differences in style, audience, and purpose for each of the gospel writers. Of course, there are many more features of each account we could list and compare.

All four gospels give an account of John the Baptist preaching about the coming Messiah. And all four gospels tell about the baptism of Jesus. Each of the gospel writers – whether writing to Jews, Romans, or Greeks – thought these were important events.

We heard an account of the baptism read from Matthew a little while ago. What was this baptism all about? What meaning did it have for the ministry of Jesus that was to follow? What meaning does it have for us?

Baptism with water was not a new idea for the people listening to John the Baptist. Jews already practiced various kinds of ritual cleansing. But the baptizing John was doing had a different meaning. It had implications for the coming reign of God through Jesus. It had implications for the place of repentant persons baptized into it.² Luke writes that John went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.³ Jewish people couldn't rely on their ancestry to save them, they needed to acknowledge their shortcomings and have a change of heart.

Let's go back to our comparison of the four gospel accounts. Neither Mark nor Luke record any conversation between John and Jesus. According to the gospel of John, when John the Baptist sees Jesus coming, he declares, *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*⁴ This is the man I've been talking about. *I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.*⁵ That the Jews might recognize who Jesus is.

In Matthew's account, John protests saying, *I need to be cleansed by You. Why do You come to me?*⁶ And Jesus insists that he be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus says, *It will be right, true, and faithful to God's chosen path for you to cleanse Me with your hands in the Jordan River.*⁷

But John had been preaching about repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Did Jesus need to repent? Did his sins need to be forgiven?

I've been reading a memoir by Timothy McMahan King titled *Addiction Nation: What the Opioid Crisis Reveals about Us*.⁸ Each chapter has a one word title: *Beginnings, Disease, Us, Others, Shame, Blame*, and so on. Just this week I read the chapter titled *Sin*. King admits that he doesn't love the word *sin*.

He writes: *Sin has often been synonymous with 'things I don't like,' and sinner with 'the people who aren't like me.'* *In dominant Christian culture, the idea of sin has been used as a battering ram of shame. And the concept has done a great deal of harm when used to describe the actions of particular people who struggle with specific addictions and as a convenient way to ignore the actions of others.*⁹ King goes on to define sin as the expression of evil in the world. And states that sin clings to individuals and groups and societies.

This is helpful to me as I consider the baptism of Jesus. His baptism was to fulfill righteousness, to carry out God's will of restoration of recreating a world without evil. It was right, true, and faithful to God's chosen path for Jesus to be cleansed in preparation for his ministry. Jesus taught about how to be free from sin; how to confess the sin within rather than

² Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year A*, Abingdon Press, 2001, p. 61.

³ Luke 3:3.

⁴ John 1:29, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁵ John 1:31, *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁶ Matthew 3:14, *The Voice*.

⁷ Matthew 3:15, *The Voice*.

⁸ Timothy McMahan King, *Addiction Nation: What the Opioid Crisis Reveals about Us*, Herald Press, 2019.

⁹ King, p. 92.

pointing out the sin in others; how to recognize the sin in structures, groups, and societies; how to give up your life to combat sin; and how the power of God can defeat it.

After the baptism, Mathew, Mark, and Luke all report that Jesus sees the heavens open and the Spirit of God descending like a dove. A voice from heaven speaks words of blessing: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.* I like this phrasing: *This is My Son, whom I love; this is the Apple of My eye; with Him I am well pleased.*¹⁰

The Gospel of John reports John the Baptist testifying that he saw the dove descend and remain on Jesus. John could testify that, indeed, Jesus is the Son of God. This is good news; this is the gospel.

It's because of this good news and because of Jesus' example that we too choose the symbolic action of baptism. The water of baptism doesn't save us. It doesn't give us free reign to do anything we want because now we have a "get out of hell free" card. It doesn't mean that we now have to be perfect.

In our church, we decide to be baptized as a symbol of our desire to be faithful to God's ways, to God's path for us in the world. And I welcome you to take this step of baptism if you've not already done so.

As we are baptized and as we remember our baptism we take many actions. We confess that we have expressed evil through thoughts and actions. We recognize that sin clings to individuals and groups and societies. We follow Jesus' example of working against the expression of evil around us. We celebrate the power of God in overcoming evil. We commit to worshiping, learning, serving, praying, and celebrating with a church, a community of faith. We express our desire to claim our truest identities as beloved children of God, and for everyone else to do the same.

This is good news indeed – according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, according to John, according to Jesus. Thanks be to God.

	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Portrait of Jesus	King Messiah	Servant Son of God	Teacher Loves All	Son of God Son of Man
Original Readers	Jews	Romans	Greeks Theophilus	Greeks The Church
Key Phrase	Kingdom of Heaven	Immediately	Son of Man	Believe
Prominent Sections	Sermons	Miracles	Parables	Teaching
Genealogy	Traced to Abraham	None	Traced to Adam	None
Baptism of Jesus	John Protests Jesus Insists	No Dialogue	No Dialogue	John Declares, "Behold the Lamb of God"
After the Baptism	Spirit of God and a Voice from Heaven	Spirit of God and a Voice from Heaven	Spirit of God and a Voice from Heaven	John Witnesses, "I saw the Spirit of God Descend."

¹⁰ Matthew 3:17, *The Voice*.