

The Spiritual Formation of Jesus...for you (various scriptures)

Today I want to begin a short series of messages built around the idea of the spiritual formation of Jesus. This is an idea that's been on my mind for some time, and we've touched on aspects of this over the years, but I thought it would be useful to bring these ideas together in a way that helps us to see what contributed to the development of his inner life so that we could see how this applies to the formation of our inner life so that it matches his. This is God's desire for you—that your inner life would match the inner life of Jesus so that you might experience the quality of life that Jesus possessed, which naturally includes the depth of relationship with God evidenced in the life of Jesus and available to you.

One of my goals in addressing this topic is to dispel the false notion that Jesus' life experience is not available to us, that it is somehow out of reach for us, that since Jesus was the Son of God, it stands to reason that his life would be unattainable to us. Yet the New Testament regularly points us to the example of Jesus—not to berate or condemn us for our spiritual impoverishment by comparison, but to encourage us—literally to give us courage in our pursuit of his life precisely because it is attainable, therefore we're urged to make every effort towards it so that we gain its quality and durability.

At the outset we recognize the need to live within the tension of holding that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. This is clearly taught in the New Testament, it is basic to the confessions of the Church—it is mystery and in the history of the church many brilliant minds have sought to unravel it. It's not my goal to offer another solution to this. Some things are better left mystery, which doesn't make them untrue; it just means that we simply haven't got the means at our disposal to fully understand it. It's a bit like when my dog Barney discovers his water bowl empty—he watches me pick it up, take it over to the sink, and when I return it to the floor, voila! there's more water. There's a perfectly reasonable explanation for why this is so, but Barney doesn't have the means to understand how I make water appear, yet he's happy enough to receive it. While fully confessing agreement with scripture and the wisdom of the church's collective and historic understanding of the simultaneous humanity and deity of Jesus, leaving that mystery intact, I do want to offer a point of departure suggesting that in order for Jesus to be a plausible model for our faith expression and practice, I believe that while on earth, Jesus lived completely, and only within the scope of typical human capability and understanding.

This hadn't always been my understanding. Early in faith I managed the tension between his deity and humanity as an inner/outer division—that is, he was human on the outside, but inside he was all God. I took it to mean that from day one, Jesus always had full understanding of his deity within him, absolute knowledge, absolute power, brilliant glory, and when faced with a serious issue he dipped into his deity to exact a solution. That's a minor heresy, but it was worth the risk to solve the dilemma for me.

It took a close reading of Hebrews to disabuse me of that notion and bring me to my present understanding. The book of Hebrews holds the tension between Jesus' deity and humanity, but certain phrases caught my attention—let me run them by you to set the stage. Just listen, you can download the text to get the references later. In 1:3, "Jesus is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's being." 2:10, "God...made the author of our salvation perfect (or complete) through suffering." 2:14, "since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity." 2:17, "Jesus had to be made like his brothers in every way." 3:1, "Jesus was faithful to the one who appointed him." 5:7, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission." 5:8, "although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." 10:7, "Here I am (Christ speaking), I have come to do your will, O God." 12:2, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith who endured the cross, scorning its shame...consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Pondering this convinced me that during his life, in every respect, Jesus lived only within the human condition and capabilities common to all persons, meaning that he acquired

his self-understanding, his knowledge of God, and the beauty of his life by the same means available to all persons, and for this reason he qualifies as an example for how we gain the quality of his life. Our goal, then, in this series is to discover the elements that shaped Jesus' understanding and formed his approach to life. It's not so that we duplicate the specific events of his life for much of this was in service to his role as messiah. That life has been lived, served its purpose and doesn't need to be repeated. Instead, our hope is to live into the elements of what formed him as a person who was faithful to God's direction for his life so that we find our way to the place where we are faithful to God's direction for our particular life.

In the time remaining today, I want to explore beginnings with you—what got Jesus underway as life on earth began for him. And here, then, we want to see the vital role of godly parenting. Jesus was born into a household of practicing faith to people of godly character. From the gospel accounts we annually read during the Christmas season, we learn that his mother, Mary, was a humble person, well-versed in the faith history of Israel and cognizant of God's character as revealed in her song that recounts the work of God while joyfully anticipating God's continuing work. Significantly we see that Mary, though perplexed at the wonder of what the angel Gabriel announced, was yielded to God's purposes even in the face of the dilemma this news would cause for her with Joseph and her wider family and friends. By the same set of scriptures, we learn that Joseph was a kind and honorable man. Undoubtedly he was heartbroken to learn of Mary's pregnancy, but he intended to deal with the crisis in the kindest possible way. Again, significantly, we see that when he receives divine confirmation of the basis for her condition, he also yields to God's purposes and is obedient to the directive to receive Mary as his wife.

As parents, Mary and Joseph were steeped in faith and active in its devotion—they offered the required sacrifice in the Temple upon the birth of Jesus, and we learn that they made the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover. They did this despite the distance they had to travel—it would be like walking from Seattle to Bellingham—and the expense of that undertaking with the reality that they were likely poor as evidenced by the type of sacrifice they offered at the birth. Jesus was raised in faith, and by what we know he lived as any other child and young person in that culture. The gospel accounts later tell us that Jesus was a regular at synagogue, meaning that he grew up under the Law of Moses, recited the Shema, and that he, along with his parents participated in the practices of Israel's faith including its festivals.

Though we have to piece this profile together from snippets scattered in the gospel texts, it documents the value of a faith-based home life. Jesus followed in the footsteps of his parents learning of life and God through them. Their example and influence was evidenced when, on one occasion at age 12, Jesus engaged in conversation with the teachers of the Law at the Temple who were amazed at his grasp of the faith as he listened, asked questions, and offered answers to their questions. By all accounts his upbringing shaped his perspective though he didn't receive any special treatment, nor was he shielded from the reality of life as it was known at that time. The faith forming in him passed along to him by godly parents sustained him as he witnessed the congruity of their faith with the way they approached life. And this seamless integration of faith and life was woven into the fabric of his life by their example.

We'll pick up more about the specifics of that faith when next we meet, but for the moment I want to draw this together by stressing the value of a faith-filled household for nurturing the spiritual formation of children. Households are laboratories for spiritual formation because of the range of dynamics that occur within them. Relationships between parents, between siblings and friends teach about love, sacrifice, values, conflict resolution, and priorities. Within all of this you have the opportunity to weave the thread of faith in and among it all, and it isn't primarily passed along in what you say, but more in how you say it and how it is demonstrated in the way you live, the way you react to life's circumstances, the approach you take to challenges that arise, the priorities you elect, the decisions you make. Households are where children learn about life. They gain their initial and foundational view of life from parents—it's an awesome privilege to partner with God in forming a child's outlook and faith. This is why I'm excited that we're shifting our focus in staffing from ministry to children, to

ministry for family, because as a church we want to provide opportunity for families to grow together in faith. We recognize that parents are the primary teachers of faith to their children, and we want to equip parents for that awesome ministry.

Your children will take faith as seriously as you do—if they see congruence with what you profess by how you live, they will lean into faith by following your lead. Perhaps you no longer have children living at home—this applies equally to grandparenting; you continue to lead by example especially by demonstrating the lifelong development of faith. As your life is centered in Christ, you invite your grandchildren into that circle allowing them to experience the quality of life such a life delivers. If you don't have grandchildren, there are opportunities for you to be engaged in youth mentoring programs—we have access to one such program here in which you can participate where the character of your life in Christ can influence a child or young person who may not have that opportunity in their homelife. If you have the will to engage in spiritual formation of children and youth, there is always a way.

Maybe you're thinking that ship has sailed. That, perhaps, you've missed that boat and the window of opportunity has closed—that perhaps there's been too much distance between what you profess and what you practice. Don't lose hope. Decide to be that parent right now, repent of whatever needs repentance, and in this know that repentance involves a change of action, but also includes an expansion of vision. Think beyond the immediate into the horizon of God's limitless love and endless possibilities. You can't change the past, but you can chart a new course for the future. Form your intent—this is what you want to do, and then pursue the means, this is how you'll do it—commit this to prayer, and find God's grace enabling you to live into the richness of faith centered in Christ.

The spiritual formation of Jesus took place on this earth surrounded by the realities of life common to all. It took in him allowing him to be faithful to God's direction for his life, and it can take hold of you allowing you to be faithful to God's direction for your life and that of your household as well. AMEN