

to lose their freedom. I know of people who stand on the edge of life, looking at it wistfully, longing to be a greater part of it, but never willing to make the plunge. I know of people and have seen people standing on the fringes of the life of the church, carefully partaking of certain aspects of its life, but never becoming a member of it. Afraid of becoming involved, afraid of losing their own freedom and as a result missing out on so much. There is no life without committment; no vision without wading into the waters of the Jordan. There is no beauty ever anywhere in the world without committment to the discipline of art. No love without committment to some one person and the respönsibilities that that relationships involves. "And so as Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan the heavens themselves opened". Remember that.

And so as we come to the end of chapter two in this story about the vision of Jesus, you may be saying to yourself: "But I have no visions. My life goes on rather monotonously day after day without any high moments. I'm past middle age. My mountain top experiences are all behind me. I go about my work as well as I can, but there is no thrill, no excitement" Or you may be young, starting out and as you look forw rd to the uncertainties in your own future your attitude may be somewhat similar: "I've never had any great visions; there is nothing that I particularly want to do with my life; nothing has ever stirred the depths in me in the fashion of which you have been talking to us this morning".

Of course no one person can adequately answer all of the questions that this might raise or speak to every situation suggested by those of you who have shared in this service today, but I would like to say this and perhaps this may help to point the way. I should like to think that He for whom the heavens once opened on the banks of the Jordan as he came up out of the waters is Himself the opening of heaven for us. He is our vision. And I should like to think that here at the end of this service He is speaking to you quietly now through these words and the thoughts I have suggested - choosing you, encouraging you, filling you with a power greater than yourself, a power that will enable you to go down into that valley of decision where discipline is involved, giving you the strength and the energy to withstand all difficulties, and leading you up tadthe highest possible levels to live a life of forgiveness, understanding and love. This is your task. This shall be your crown.

LET US PRAY

Give to each of us, Our Father, in these moments of silence at the end of this service a vision of thy truth and thy goodness that in the light of it we may work without rest and rewards for the realization of thy way in our selfish and sinful world. Help us not to be afraid of going down ~~into~~ the waters of the Jordan for in so doing we shall be lifted up to a higher level. We ask this in the name of him whose vision of thee was so great that it eventually involved him in the experience of Calvary. Amen

no one stopped me. Somehow my singing came to the attention of other people, because one day I was invited to sing in a church choir. It was there I met Arthur Calhoun, an educated Negro musician and he invited me to his home where for the first time I heard the music of Caruso and Melba on phonograph records. I have never been able adequately to describe what happened to me when I listened to those records. It was a religious experience, for a door seemed to open, revealing to me the dim outline of the purpose which is now my whole life. I knew suddenly that my goal was to become a great singer, but it went even deeper than that. I felt God entering my life majestically and I sensed that He was choosing me for an almighty mission."

For that young Negro boy, Roland Hayes, on that day the heavens opened and his life at that moment really began. It began, you might say, with a vision. Every life that amounts to anything always begins with a vision.

The second comment that I would suggest to you would be this: THESE GREAT VISIONS OF LIFE ALWAYS LEAD ONE INTO THE VALLEY OF DECISION, AND ALWAYS INVOLVE ELEMENTS OF DISCIPLINE, AND PURPOSE. Roland Hayes can take us into this second step of our thinking for he writes:

"From that moment on, I realized that I dared not depend on others to help me. In order to achieve my goal and to realize my life's purpose, I knew I would have to take chances and give every ounce of my being. Against all advice I quit my factory job and set out to become a singer. The next few years were hard years, full of discouragement, disappointment and set back, and as I traveled from city to city there were the hard decisions that had to be made and there was the beginning of that stern and narrow discipline that makes a singer."

And so as we follow the way of Jesus, we must be prepared to follow him into the valley of decision, for his vision, like everybody's vision, led him into the valley where great decisions had to be made and grave disciplines undertaken.

And the third comment that all of this suggests, and perhaps this will be the most penetrating and significant comment of the three, is simply this: THE VISION COMES ONLY TO THOSE WHO ARE UNAFRAID OF THE WATERS OF THE JORDAN. Let me elaborate on this. In other words, the great visions of life, these great experiences and insights, never come to those who are afraid of what I would call "involvement". Note carefully the sequence of events in the life of Jesus at this moment. He committed himself first of all to the experience of baptism, and then it was that he had this vision. Not before, but after. There are different ways of expressing this rule of life, this law of human experience. Think of it this way: there is no life without commitment. And it seems to me as I observe life around me and as I try to understand myself, that one of the greatest fears that plague people today is the fear of becoming involved, the fear of getting tied down with something that might mean a reduction of their freedom. And this same fear often paralyzes life. I know wonderful people in middle life, and not all of them are in middle life either as I think of them, who are afraid of becoming involved in marriage and a family. They do not want

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN HE WAS BAPTIZED?

We come now to the next question which I would like to consider with you: what actually happened when he was baptized? The Gospel account tells us that as Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan he saw the heavens open. Apparently nobody else saw anything or heard anything unusual. Therefore, we are tempted to interpret this as a subjective, religious, emotional experience that Jesus went through. In those earlier years of his life, in those first twenty-nine years, there had undoubtedly been intimations and suggestions that he was meant for something special in life, that God had sent him into the world to perform some specific tasks of unique significance. There had been glimpses and glances and guesses; there had been brief interludes of certainty, and then periods of obscurity and uncertainty.

But now, however, as he comes out of the water there is clarity and certainty, truth and illumination. He knows now what God wants him to do. And later on when he came to describe this wonderful spiritual experience to his friends, he put it in specific, visual language, as we should expect. He said it was as though the spirit of God, like a dove, descended upon him; as though something from above, greater than himself, came down upon him and took possession of him; as though from henceforward a power filled him that was a power far greater than himself, giving him strength and energy to withstand all difficulties. He went on to say that he heard a voice and the voice said to him "Thou art my son, in whom I am well pleased". It was a voice speaking to him in the words of a psalm that he had known all of his life, the words of the second psalm of David which was always used for the coronation of a king. In other words what Jesus was tryin to say was something like this: as he saw the heavens open and the clouds of doubt driven away and felt the spirit of God descend into his life like it never had before, he was conscious of the fact that God had chosen him. "You are the one" the voice kept saying. "You are the one to show my people the way, you are the one to reveal my love to them, you are the one I have chosen; your way will not be easy and your destiny will be hard and difficult, but you are the one I have chosen".

And so Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan with a vision of God's purpose and his own destiny, and it was that great vision that was to sustain him through all of the unfair opposition in Galilee, through all of the disloyalty of his friends, through all of the darkness of Gethsemane, through the unjust trial in Jerusalem and finally through the blackness of Calvary.

THREE COMMENTS

Now in the remaining time that we have together here this morning, I should like to suggest to you three comments having to do with this great experience in the life of Jesus as we think of it in terms of our own lives.

The first comment would be something like this: EVERY LIFE THAT AMOUNTS TO ANYTHING ALWAYS BEGINS WITH A VISION, A VISION OF SOMETHING THAT COMMENDS ITSELF AS SUPREMELY DESIRABLE AND ULTIMATELY VALUABLE. And in order to take this out of the realm of specifically the religious life, think of it, if you will, in terms of the life of the great Negro singer, Roland Hayes. In the story of his life, he tells us of the great turning point in his life and how it occurred when he was a teenage boy working in a factory in Chattanooga, Tennessee:

"I always sang during my work, because it was as natural for me to sing as to breathe. The factory owners didn't generally allow it, but when they discovered that the men worked better when I sang,

A second reason could be suggested and this one may come closer to the truth than the preceding reason. I think that Jesus wanted to see a contemporary of his whose name was John and about whom there was a great deal of talk. Everyone seemed to be talking about this strange young man who had suddenly appeared out of the desert and who now was holding open air meeting in the wasteland east of the Jordan. Everyone was talking about him; John the Baptizer they called him. Crowds from Jerusalem were going down to the banks of the Jordan to hear him preach. Crowds from all over Palestine were flocking to see him and to be baptized by him. Tradition has it that these two men - Jesus and John - were cousins. Both were about the same age. They lived far apart and apparently never saw each other except at this one period in their lives. They had several things in common with each other. Both had intensely religious natures. Both were deeply concerned with the things of God. Both were deeply concerned with the failure of their own people - the Jews. For as they looked at the situation around them, a situation not only of external distress, but also of internal decay, they did not place the blame for it on the external forces of their environment, on their enemies as most people at that time were tempted to do, but rather they placed the blame for it on the people themselves, on their own failure to respond to the will of God. And so there was John, in the wasteland east of the Jordan River, preaching to the crowds that came out to hear him and baptizing hundreds and hundreds of them, and as they submerged themselves in the dirty waters of the Jordan, they acted in a symbolic way as though to say that they recognized their sin and selfishness, their corruption and mistakes and were determined to do better in the future. John was the best there was up to this time and Jesus left Nazareth and came to see what John was doing, and when he came and saw and heard, he went to John and was baptized, like all of the rest, in the Jordan River.

There is still another reason as to why Jesus left Nazareth. It's a deeper reason than the two preceding ones which I have thus far suggested to you. I think that Jesus wanted to be involved in the life of his own people and in the life of his own times. And so he took this step and outwardly identified himself with the people and his times. He did not hold himself aloof, but rather he went down into the dirty and muddy waters of the Jordan and was baptized by John. I hope that I have not offended any of you by suggesting and describing the Jordan River in such terms. The waters of the Jordan are dirty and muddy. I have seen the Jordan River and stood on the banks of the Jordan where, according to tradition, John baptized those who came to him. Those waters are muddy and dirty. I always hesitate to refer in my sermons too often to my own personal experiences in the Holy Land for I heard recently about a minister who talked so much about his trip to the Holy Land that when the Pastoral Relations Committee began to look for his successor, they announced that they would consider no candidate who had ever visited the Holy Land. And Jesus went down into the dirty and muddy waters of the Jordan. He did not hold himself aloof. I think one of the great tragedies of the Christian Church today in America rests in the conservative reluctance of many of its finest members to go down into the dirty and muddy waters of our society with the message of Christ. Too often too many of us hold ourselves aloof. Too often we stand in the private little backwaters of our own circle where nothing can interfere with our comfortable lives, unwilling to become involved in the complex struggles and sensitive issues that face us today. This is no time for us to hold ourselves aloof, unconcerned, but rather it is the time for us to take off our white gloves and put our hands into the dirty and muddy waters of our society, to become involved in the life of our own people and our own times. "And it came to pass in those days that Jesus.."

THE STORY OF JESUS
"CHAPTER II: HIS BAPTISM"

INTRODUCTION

The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are attempting to tell the Story of Jesus. And those of you who were here last Sunday morning will recall that together we considered certain aspects having to do with his birth, and that I shared with you some of my own thoughts and convictions having to do with his coming into our world. The story of Jesus now moves from his birth to his baptism almost thirty years later. There's only one brief reference to those intervening years, and that reference is to be found in Luke's Gospel where he tells us that at the age of twelve Jesus was taken to Jerusalem for one of the great religious festivals. Perhaps you will recall the incident. Perhaps you remember that Jesus found himself so much at home in the great Temple there in Jerusalem and that he was so interested in the teachers in the Temple that he forgot all about his parents and was left behind by mistake.

The rest, however, is silence. Those intervening years, from this incident to the time of his baptism, have often been referred to as the "hidden years". People have often been tempted to speculate as to what went on during those "hidden years". There have been some who fancied that during this period of time he traveled extensively in Egypt and India and there became well acquainted with the religion and philosophy of those mystic lands. Others have been so bold as to suggest that during this period of time he experienced love, marriage and parenthood arriving at this conclusion because of the great understanding of women and the intimate knowledge of children which he later on displayed in the years of his public ministry. However, about all that we really know, about all of which we are absolutely certain concerning these "hidden years" can be summed up in a few brief sentences. We know that Jesus was brought up in the little town of Nazareth and was therefore subject to all of the influences of a small town. We know that he was the eldest of five sons and the brother of at least two sisters. We know that his father was a carpenter and that he, himself, probably learned the trade. And we know too that when he was about thirty years of age he left Nazareth. He left his home, his friends, his trade. He left his family and all of his responsibilities and that he never went back except for one brief visit. And so all of this brings us to the first question that I would have you consider with me this morning in this the second chapter in the story of Jesus. Why did he leave Nazareth?

WHY DID HE LEAVE NAZARETH?

Why did he leave Nazareth? Several reasons could be suggested. Let me suggest to you three reasons, (and I'll try to do this as briefly as possible). To begin with he may have wanted to get away from home - not because his home was not a good home, for there is every indication that it was - and not because he was not a good son, for there is every reason to believe that he was a good son, a responsible young man. He may have wanted to get away from home simply because he was a normal young man and it is the natural desire of most young people, sooner or later, to leave the nest, to see the world, to stand on their own two feet, to try their wings and stretch their limbs and broaden their horizon. And so in every generation the towers of the distant city glittering in the sunlight have attracted the earnest youth up in the hills and he has not been able to rest until he has turned his steps in the direction of those glittering towers. This leads me to suggest to you something of a marginal note or comment: I think one of the tragedies involved in so many young lives today is that they have never peered over the walls of their own backyard.