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Sermon for 2/21/21

CHRIST'S CONDESCENSION  
By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The Word became flesh.

It's the first Sunday of Lent, and for our reading on this Sunday, the lectionary points us to a familiar scene in the early ministry of Christ, the occasion when he allows himself to be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan river.

This episode has caused a lot of head-scratching among religious thinkers over the centuries, because the baptism of John was a baptism of repentance, and Jesus, as we know, led the sinless life, and therefore had nothing to repent of. But if he wasn't repenting or symbolizing his repentance of anything, what exactly *was* he doing in submitting to John's baptism?

Theories abound, of course, as they always do among the head scratchers. But I think one thing they all have in common, and which we can venture to assert with confidence, was that his baptism from John was part of and symbolic of the choice Jesus made to step down from his divinity and lower himself completely into humanity. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, describes it this way:

*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God...made himself to be of no reputation, taking the form of a servant and coming in the likeness of men.(Philippians 2: 5-7)*

And Paul offers another description in his second letter to the Corinthians:

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich. ( 2 Cor. 8: 9)*

In theological circles, this is sometimes spoken of as Christ's *condescension*, which is from the Latin *con*, meaning with, and *decendere*, meaning to descend. So the word literally means to step down to be with. Jesus became fully human, and dwelt among us. The baptism was part of his decision to do his work from the bottom up, so to say, rather than from the top down.

Why did he make that decision?

In thinking about this question, I was brought back in memory to another baptism.

Many years ago, I spent a whole summer sharing a camp in eastern Oregon with another young fellow when we were both working in the forest service, although we had different jobs. Every night, the two of us would cook a meal over a campfire, and talk about this and that before retiring to our tents. Sometimes he would be late getting back to our camp, but I never asked him what he had been up to. I figured he had a girlfriend in town.

At that time, I had graduated from a very prestigious college with a degree in philosophy, while my friend's education had concluded after a year of community college. Although we had never talked about religious issues, I had sort of known he was a Christian, while I was what you'd probably have to call an atheist, although I had read many of the great Christian writers during the course of my education.

And then one evening late in that summer he didn't show up at all. I cooked and ate supper alone, and then went to bed. In the morning, he was back in our camp, but there was no time to talk while we gulped down our instant coffee and drove into work.

When I drove back to our camp that day after work, my friend was already there, and over our campfire supper – which usually consisted of a couple of cans of goulash or chunky soup, or something else along those lines – I asked him where he had been. He told me that he had recently been

attending a fundamentalist church on Sundays, and that last night they had all gathered at a river, and he had been baptized in the river. He said it had been a wonderful, life-changing experience.

I proceeded to lecture him about the meaninglessness of these religious rituals, and how true Christian faith was founded on personal revelation, without all the bells and whistles of fundamentalist ceremonies like being baptized in a river.

We went back and forth for a while, but by the end of our conversation over the campfire, I had pretty effectively, I felt, won the debate. He was eventually reduced to simply nodding silently to my superior wisdom, and when we retired to our tents that night, I was very pleased with myself in having elevated his understanding of what Christianity was really all about in its essence, even though I wasn't actually a Christian myself at that point.

I'm ashamed to confess now that I behaved very condescendingly towards my friend, in the modern sense of the term. I spoke down **to** him, rather than went down to be with him.

What happened after that? The really close friendship we had shared up to that evening changed from that point on. Our conversations over the campfire became brief and impersonal, and never touched on anything having to do with Christ, or faith, or our very different religious beliefs.

Winter made its presence felt, and our summer jobs in the forest service came to an end. We both worked there again the next summer, but this time there was no thought of camping together. We just said hello now and then when our paths happened to cross. And in later years, although we had been so close that one summer, I never heard from my friend again.

And perhaps that gives us at least a partial explanation of why Jesus chose to work from below, so to say, rather than from above.

A few weeks ago, we read about the episode in the synagogue where Jesus casts an unseen spirit out of a man and the people marveled that even the demons obeyed him.

Did Jesus believe in demons and unclean spirits? Maybe or maybe not. But the people he was among certainly did, and it is by entering into their

beliefs and working at that level that Jesus accomplished his healing. Suppose the deranged man had cried out for healing, and Jesus had simply said: *There's no such thing as demons. Sit back down and stop making a fuss.* In other words, suppose Jesus had behaved towards this man the way I behaved towards my friend.

But because he didn't behave the way I did, because he condescended in the original sense, the man was healed. Whereas the result of my condescension was, a friendship was lost.

The Gospel accounts are full of examples of Christ's condescension to those he's trying to help. Remember when Jesus cured a man's blindness by picking up a handful of dirt, spitting on it, and then rubbing the mud onto that man's eyes. Was that necessary for the miracle to take place?

Certainly not: Jesus cured blindness in others by simply uttering a word. But clearly it was necessary in Christ's mind for this particular man in this particular case to believe in the miracle. Christ condescended to this man's beliefs, and worked at that level.

The central point of Jesus submitting to John's baptism, I believe, was that, from the very beginning, Jesus committed himself to work from the bottom up, rather than the top down. He would condescend to us – to where we are, to our beliefs and understanding, to our languages and customs and hopes and fears – and build from there.

In all the Gospels accounts of this episode, we're told that immediately afterwards, Jesus was led into the wilderness and subjected to various temptations. The temptations, I would suggest, were all various ways of offering Jesus the possibility of doing his work from the top down, of **imposing** the kingdom of God on the earth, rather than growing the kingdom out of the earth's natural soil.

If all of this is true, then what are the implications for us? The most obvious from a historical point of view is that Jesus chose a process that would be long, slow, halting and laborious. Consider the fact that here we are now, two thousand years later, and the world around us, viewed through spiritual eyes, still looks very little like a kingdom of love, mercy, humility and forgiveness.

But then, consider the alternatives. Human history is essentially one long saga of powerful individuals and governments **imposing** their visions of the good on the people under their power, and that same history is littered with the ruins of those attempts, and filled with the human misery left in their wake.

C.S. Lewis wrote something I often think of about how even the best-intentioned of these attempts to impose from above invariably lead to failure and increased misery.

*“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.”*

But if you believe, as I do, that the Gospel message is meant to speak primarily to the individual, rather than to nations and civilizations, the point becomes even more important, and relevant to each and every one of us.

Remember when you were learning arithmetic, and there came a moment when you weren't just citing from memory that three times five equals fifteen, but that you actually **saw** it, and realized why it was true and had to be true? At that point, the **truth** of it became part of you. It wasn't something someone had drilled into you from outside; it was near you, it was in you and in your mouth and in your heart, as the author of Deuteronomy describes the Word of God.

In the novel 1984, the hero, under torture, is forced to say, and comes to actually believe, that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . He now lives in a lie and must therefore always walk in darkness. I was reminded of that this past summer by images of political activists screaming in the faces of diners in restaurants, and terrorizing them into performing some symbolic gesture of conformity. Beliefs certainly can be imposed from above, but the result is a puppet, not a person, not a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile, not a child of God.

Each one of us is created in the image of God. Whatever else that might mean, it means that what we do and feel and think and say are our own

responsibility, and are meant to reflect who we are in our deepest spirit. That's why Jesus lays such stress both on making the tree good, and on walking in the light. Making the tree good means making it the product of your own willful faith and choice, and conforming it to the character that can flourish in heaven, a character defined by mercy, humility and forgiveness. Walking in the light means your actions flow naturally from that character within and not from mindless obedience to the supervision of the tyranny of the world.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly father, is that you help us to clarify our own thoughts and purify our own hearts, that you protect us from the evil of all varieties of tyranny, large and small, that you ensure us the liberty of becoming worthy heirs of Your Kingdom, along with Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.