

Son of Man

TEXT: John 1:43-51

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on December 4, 2022

For the rest of Advent, we're going back into Bible study mode, and in these remaining three weeks we're going to focus on Jesus. This week we're going to look at Jesus as a human being and the biblical title "Son of Man." Next week we'll look at Jesus specifically as Jewish teacher, who many called the "Son of David," and what was going on in Judaism in Jesus' day. Then, on December 18th, we'll look at how all of that eventually morphed into the Christian belief of Jesus as the "Son of God." So, first, the title.

Jesus is called "Son of Man" 88 times in the New Testament. The phrase appears 107 times in the Hebrew Bible, with 93 of those appearing in the book of Ezekiel. It's not particularly difficult to parse. "Son of Man," simply refers to being human. Christian doctrine teaches that Jesus was fully human and fully divine—both at once. Don't ask me how that's possible; I just work here. But that's the doctrine, passed down from the early church councils.

While churches today often focus on the divine part, Jesus as "Son of God," it's plain from the gospels, that Jesus wants his followers focused on the human part, because "Son of Man" is the primary title Jesus uses for himself. So, let's begin there. Jesus the man; Jesus the human being. What do we know about him?

First, Jesus is a historical figure. The assertion that there once lived a Jewish man known as Jesus of Nazareth is a historical fact accepted by the vast majority of scholars. You can find naysayers, of course, just as you can find flat-earthers, but they're in the same category. The evidence is overwhelmingly weighted toward the actual, physical existence of Jesus.

Scholars of all faiths and of no faith agree that you can take the following to the bank:

- Jesus was born a Jew somewhere between 7 and 2 BCE and was raised in the insignificant Galilean village of Nazareth.
- He surely spoke Aramaic and perhaps also Hebrew and Greek.
- He was baptized by John the Baptist.
- His ministry was limited to the regions of Galilee and Judea.
- He was crucified at the order of Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect, between 30 and 36 CE.

It's not a long list of facts, but it's a significant one. To talk about Jesus is not to talk about a fictional character. But fact-checking the life of Jesus is hard. When I applied to join the Mayflower Society and had to submit genealogical records, I had the most difficulty proving the existence of my own grandfather, who I knew in the flesh. Verifying historical information for someone who lived over two thousand years ago is a tricky business, and it's in those details of what, exactly, Jesus said and did that the scholarly consensus breaks up. After all, even the four Gospels differ on those matters.

But even if we can't get at every fact about Jesus' life, it's really helpful for Bible study to understand the cultural, political, and religious context of what you're reading. The Bible wasn't written in a vacuum and Jesus wasn't born onto a piece of parchment. Just as Jesus was a real person, Nazareth is a real place, and the first century in the Roman colony of Palestine had very specific issues and challenges for the people who lived within its borders.

We'll deal with the specifically Jewish context next week. But for this week, as we look at Jesus the human, I want to look at Nazareth, the town where he was raised, and the general contours of Jesus' family and friends. The gospel accounts agree that Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph, who made their home in Nazareth. Matthew has them settle in Nazareth after Jesus' birth and Luke has them living in Nazareth before the birth of

Jesus, but everybody puts the family there from when Jesus was very young. The family never moves, and all indications are that Jesus also remained there until the start of his ministry around age 30.

Nazareth was East Podunk. It was a small, poor, nowhere town in the broader region known as the Galilee. Nazareth's reputation is evident from the Bible passage I chose for this morning about Jesus recruiting Philip and Nathanael as disciples. Philip is excited to join the group and runs to find his friend Nathanael to bring him along. Philip's recruitment line is, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Instead of jumping up in amazement, Nathanael sneers, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" That was the town's reputation.

At the time of Jesus, Nazareth had no paved roads, no public buildings or inscriptions, and fewer than four hundred residents. Some of the land was terraced for farming and there was a stone quarry. Archaeologists have found no imported wares, no fancy mosaics or even any plain ones. There was no glass. "But, wait!" you say. Matthew and Mark both tell us that Jesus went home and preached in the synagogue in Nazareth, so surely there must have been at least one public building. Right?

Well, not necessarily. In the first century, the word "synagogue" referred to the gathering of the people, whether they gathered in a specially dedicated space or in someone's home. Just like we sing today that the church is not a building; that we, the people, are the church; it was the same for the synagogue in Jesus' day. The Temple in Jerusalem was a building. The synagogue was a people, and they met in homes, as well as in buildings devoted to that purpose. Jesus likely read from a scroll at a synagogue service that met in a home in Nazareth.

Homes in first-century Nazareth were stone and mud with thatched roofs. Interior walls would have been rubbed with plaster and perhaps decorated with paint. Most homes were a single room, often divided into public and private areas. Some areas of the home were on a raised platform. Those with more than one room would have had a central courtyard for cooking. Outside stairs often led to a rooftop living area partly shaded by matting or a partial tent.

A home in Nazareth might have had a small window or two up toward the roof, but mostly indoor rooms were dark, lit by oil lamps. Work was done either in the courtyard or on the roof. There would not have been furniture, as we know it—no tables, beds, and so on, although there might have been a stool or two or perhaps a chest. Nooks and shelves provided a place to put lamps, utensils, bedrolls, and clothes; there were separate storage areas, some underground, for larger jars. Cushions, pillows, and mats provided comfort for seating and sleeping on the floor. Of course, much fancier homes existed at the time, but not in the rural backwater of Nazareth.

The Bible tells us that Jesus' father, Joseph, was a carpenter by trade. In a town like Nazareth that would have meant basic, rough work—but it didn't mean only working with wood. The Greek term used for "carpenter" is broader and could have referred to any of the trades used in building. Any given carpenter might have been in either the skilled or unskilled labor pool, but both required physical strength.

Since Nazareth was so small, it's likely that a first-century carpenter living there traveled to other towns in the region to find work. When Jesus was growing up, the nearby city of Sepphoris was being rebuilt by Herod Antipas, who was the son of the Herod at Jesus' birth, and who ruled the Galilee and Perea regions during most of Jesus' lifetime. A good carpenter could probably have found plenty of employment there. Tradition in late antiquity claims Sepphoris as the birthplace of Jesus' mother, Mary.

Probably Joseph's work also included crafting yokes for donkeys and oxen, ploughs, and other agricultural tools. Since there's no indication that Nazareth imported anything, all the citizens of Nazareth were likely farmers in addition to their primary trades.

But this aspect of life was in flux as Jesus grew. Once the rebuilding of Sepphoris was completed, Herod Antipas set about making it a center of wealth, buying up land in neighboring towns and villages, including Nazareth, and then leasing it back to the one-time owners to produce crops of his choosing and for his

purposes. Local economies were devastated and families lost any way of providing for themselves, even while doing the same work on the same land as before. The abuse of the poor has not changed in 2000 years.

If Joseph did look for work in other cities, the work did not make him rich. Mary and Joseph were poor when Jesus was born. How do we know? Well, apart from settling in lowly Nazareth, the Gospel of Luke tells us that when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple to satisfy the Law of Moses, they brought the offering specified for poor people. Leviticus 12 specified that after bearing a male child, the mother had to wait forty days before she could go to the Temple to be ritually purified and an offering was required. The preferred offering was a lamb, but Leviticus 12:8 gives an option of two turtledoves or two young pigeons for those who couldn't afford a lamb. Luke 2:24 tells us that it was this poorer offering that Mary brought.

The average life expectancy for a first-century man anywhere in the colony of Palestine was a mere 29 years. One might expect that those in poorer areas like Nazareth were lucky to make even that. We don't hear about Joseph after Jesus turns 12. Many think that's because Joseph died prior to the start of Jesus' ministry.

If you were part of Colin and Ben's adult study on James, you know that Jesus had siblings. Matthew names four: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. Matthew also indicates he had sisters, but they are not named. There's some evidence that the two sons of Zebedee who became Jesus' disciples, James and John, were also Jesus' cousins, and some believe the OTHER James among the twelve disciples was actually the James who was Jesus' brother.

They're very common names, but to me it's likely that Jesus was biologically related to at least a couple of his twelve disciples. Further evidence of at least John being related is that, at his crucifixion, Jesus charges John with his mother's care. Tradition is almost unanimous that Mary went to live with John in Ephesus after Jesus' death and resurrection, and some traditions have Mary Magdalene joining them.

In addition to family, Jesus also had friends. While some of those friends were likely part of the larger group of disciples who learned from Jesus in various times and places, there appear to be three very close friends of Jesus who didn't follow him from place to place but who Jesus sought out and stayed with when he had the chance. They were three siblings who lived together in Bethany, a small town just outside Jerusalem, and 62 miles south of Nazareth: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

The Gospels give us lots of Mary's—it was also a very common name—so they are typically distinguished by where they made their home. Mary Magdalene is properly Mary of Magdala, a small town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is Mary of Bethany.

The Bible stories we get about Jesus with these three siblings show a close and loving relationship, and all the stories preserved about their relationship are significant ones. Mary and Martha famously clash when Jesus comes to visit and Martha wants her sister's help in the kitchen, but Mary sits listening to Jesus instead. Martha asks Jesus to send Mary to help her and Jesus refuses, saying Mary picked the better activity.

John's gospel tells us that Mary of Bethany was the woman who poured an expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. Judas Iscariot, who was the treasurer for the twelve disciples, gets mad because the perfume was expensive and he thinks this was a waste. And, of course, when Lazarus falls ill and dies, Jesus weeps at his tomb and then raises him from the dead.

Jesus has lots of significant experiences with people who followed him from place to place—Mary Magdalene was in that group as well as Jesus' twelve male disciples. He also had notable one-off moments with people he encountered in his travels. But the family of siblings in Bethany—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus—seem to have served as an anchor of friendship, as well as a home away from home when Jesus traveled from Nazareth in the north to Jerusalem in the south.

Although our focus naturally shifts to the stories about miracles, power, and wisdom, many places in the Bible show us a Jesus who simply knew what it was like to be human. He grew up in a family in a small town with not much going for it. He went hungry at times; he got tired enough to fall asleep in the bottom of a boat in a storm. He got frustrated with his disciples and called them dense. He got angry and cursed a fig tree for not

having figs when he was hungry, even though it wasn't the season for figs. He felt compassion; he grieved the loss of his friend Lazarus with real tears. He went to weddings with his mother. He was homeless and depended on others for support.

Jesus felt righteous indignation at the Temple economic system, made a whip, and drove the merchants and money changers out. He called religious leaders nasty names and used a slur for a Canaanite woman asking for help. He worked from dawn until dark. He was anxious enough to sweat drops of blood. He prayed for important things he didn't get. He was strong enough to carry his own cross for a time, even after being severely beaten. He knew what it was like both to be revered and to be mocked. He knew torture and death.

While the Jesus of the Bible does amazing things that we can hardly imagine happening, I think his mass appeal comes from the fact that he is a teacher who is fully accessible to his students as a human being. We don't just see a triumphant resurrection; in fact, we don't see the actual resurrection at all. But we do see, in intimate detail, a man pleading with God for a less painful road, and a brave man bearing up under brutal injustice. We don't just see a superhero casting out demons, we see a man wrestling down his own demonic temptations to fame, power, and glory.

It's faith in the signs of Jesus' authority and divinity that leads people to worship Jesus. It's the wisdom of Jesus' teaching and example that leads people to respect Jesus. But I think it's the humanity of Jesus that allows us to remain hopeful for our own humanity. It's the Jesus who lived and laughed, suffered and died as we all do—the fully human Jesus—who leads people to love Jesus. Amen.