

A 300wordsaday.com guide to reading Matthew.

Section one: Matthew 1-4

by Jon Swanson

If this were a real book, this would be a preface. But it isn't. Not yet.

Since January 2009, I've been writing 300 word commentaries on following Jesus, usually five a week. For the first year, I worked my way through the book of Matthew. This is the first ebook collection from those commentaries, covering the first four chapters of Matthew.

I am open to comments, questions, suggestions about how to format this ebook in a more useful way. In the meantime, however, I care less about formatting and more about helping people understand what following Jesus might look like. As a result, I'm releasing these notes in this format and will go back and revise and repackage as necessary.

I take responsibility for these words and they should not be blamed on the church I get to work at or the people I live with. All quotations are from the New International Version and were clipped out of biblegateway.com.

Biographical note

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A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Matthew 1:1

So you pick up a Bible and start reading Matthew. The first thing you run into is a list of names. Then, suddenly, it's Christmas. You read about wise men and dreams and Joseph. And then, without warning, Jesus is all grown up; his relative John is dunking people in a river and Jesus is arguing with the devil.

In the first four pages (depending on what copy of the Bible you have in front of you), Matthew covers a couple thousand years of Jewish history and then covers thirty years of Jesus' biography. "Covers" may be an inaccurate word. "Skims rapidly through, mentioning a few stories at comparatively great length and completely skipping stories that we would love to hear" may be more accurate.

In these stories, Matthew gives us a picture of Jesus as a protected survivor. There must be something special about him--these stories say--because angels and kings and relatives and heaven and hell are paying attention to him.

So let's take a look.

The Preface

(Matthew 1:1-17)

Why all the names?

I mean, a good writer doesn't start with a list of unpronounceable names. It is off-putting to a reader. It is not good marketing. Unless, however, you aren't actually starting the story with a list of names.

Think, instead, of a forward to a book.

- For the Matthew's first readers who knew many of the names, this is like a biography where the forward says, "This unknown person is in the tradition of expert A and scholar B and hero C."
- Or this is a book of popular psychology where the forward says, "I've known this person and can attest to his credentials."
- Or this is the infomercial kind of book where all the degrees of all the people who use this product are listed on the cover.

The first sentence of the book is a claim about a title: *Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham*. The next sentences show how that claim is true, a list of relationships. Every name is a story. Every name is identity. Every name is passing on the promise God made to Abraham and the dread of disobeying that God and the sense of being a nation.

Some stories aren't happy. Some stories are skipped and we miss a generation or two. Some stories are about controversial women, women with history. Rahab, for example, wasn't an Israelite. She was from Jericho. But she was chosen to help and was preserved in the battle of Jericho. Or Ruth, who was actually from Moab, one of the countries near Israel.

This list of names is a way of starting a story with a context. The first chapter isn't intended to be interesting prose or compelling narrative. It's to make a link for the audience that first read it.

The adventure itself, the new part, starts in verse 18: "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about."

Hearing Voices

(Matthew 1:17-25)

You probably aren't reading this at Christmas. In fact, if you are reading this at the beginning of a new year, with fresh commitments to figure out how to be more spiritual, you

probably are ready to be done with Christmas. But one word lingers because of Christmas; Immanuel. Matthew quotes Isaiah (a prophet) who uses the name Immanuel and then helpfully explains it: *God with us*.

This aside to the audience comes in the middle of a pretty traumatic story. A man named Joseph has discovered that his fiancée is pregnant, and he knows he isn't the father. Joseph could make a big spectacle, but he plans to be a gentleman. And then an angel shows up in a dream and tells him the whole story of how Mary, his fiancée, came to be pregnant. And Joseph believes what the angel says.

Many people struggle with faith. We struggle with believing. We struggle with knowing what to do next. Or, at least I do.

Then I think of Joseph who has been given about the worst news you can receive (your fiancée has apparently betrayed you). He dreams about an angel who says that the Holy Spirit made her pregnant and who says the child should be named Jesus ("the Lord saves") because he will save people from their sins. He is told to go ahead and marry Mary.

It's funny. Joseph believes in Jesus even before he knows who He is, before he meets Him. For Joseph, following Jesus, following God meant

- *Taking a risky action.* In going ahead with the wedding, Joseph risked his reputation as a "righteous man." In fact, he probably gave up that reputation.
- *Confirming a relationship with another follower.* There was one other person on the face of the earth who wouldn't laugh at the thought of an angel talking about this child being from God. He was probably apologetic the next time he saw Mary, apologizing for distrusting her, laughing at the improbability, wondering what everything meant.

These two steps are always part of following Jesus. It's the challenge of Immanuel. God with us.

(Matthew 2:1-12)

Just as we saw with Mary and Joseph, following Jesus always involves other people. That can be really frustrating. When we're working out what we believe (and sometimes *whether* we believe), having to be around other people who seem absolutely sure of *something* feels funny, feels risky.

So imagine some guys. They decide to follow God.

These guys have been searching for someone. They have been waiting. They are scholars.

They have been looking at the stars and they see a sign of some sort. They interpret this sign as confirmation, and they follow it like birds following bread crumbs. Because it is a king they have been looking for, they go to where kings are, the capital city.

This city should be the place of celebration. A royal baby, after all, is a sign of dynasty. And what they believe is that a king has been born. And they want to celebrate. And no one has any clue what they are talking about. There haven't been any royal babies. In fact, the royal family, the family of Herod, is as dysfunctional as they come, given more to betrayal than to birth.

And so, these men end up in a house in Bethlehem, a small town a couple hours walk outside Jerusalem.

You know the story from countless images of three wise men. We love to figure out how much gold they carried, what frankincense and myrrh smell like.

But think of them as followers. They are looking for as much of God as they can understand. They go to a place to find God and first find a false king and clueless people and searching people. They also find directions--which they follow. At the end they find Jesus with His family, people who don't completely understand, but are committed to Jesus.

These guys are doing this journey of following as a team. Whether there were three or thirty, they were a community of faith. And they found Jesus. And worshiped him.

That's what church is, by the way. It is "together following". Being together in following Jesus.

Urgent

(Matthew 2:13-18)

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (Matthew 2:13)

Having a plan to change isn't enough. John Kotter, who writes about organizations, discovered that even when organizations have plans to make changes that will help them, about 70 percent don't do anything at all. On the other hand, about 10 percent of the organizations with plans experience great success.

The difference between the 70 percent and the 10 percent? A sense of urgency. If change doesn't happen, the 10 percent believe, their organization will suffer. The 70 percent have plans, but they are comfortable. They are unconvinced that their organization is at risk.

Joseph understood urgency. Herod was killing babies and Jesus was a baby. What dad wouldn't run?

Except that when Joseph headed for Egypt, Herod wasn't doing anything. The only data Joseph had about a problem was that an angel showed up in a dream and warned him to leave. But Joseph now follows what he dreams. He learned from his first dream that when an angel says it, it matters; it is urgent.

Joseph follows each step of the instructions as they are revealed. Each step requires a fresh infusion of information and encouragement from God. Because at each step, there is tremendous risk. As with any dad of a toddler, life has urgency for Joseph and so he follows what God says.

Many people have great plans to follow Jesus. At the beginning of the year we want to read the Bible more and pray more and understand more. At the beginning of the year we resolve to be kinder and more loving. We resolve to obey God as much as we can. Unfortunately, if our only motivation is sense of obligation and opportunity at the new year, we will fail. Because changing is hard.

The only reason that Joseph and Mary and Jesus became homeless political refugees is that doing otherwise meant death. God and Herod said so.

The difference between Jesus followers and Jesus hobbyists? Followers know that doing otherwise means death.

(Matthew 2:23-3:1)

I heard this one day: "Forming people in Christ as a slow work, so it can't be hurried; it is an urgent work, so it can't be delayed."

Eugene Peterson said it. He's the pastor and teacher who 'wrote' *The Message*. (It's a paraphrase, taking the Bible and telling it in contemporary language and images. I find it helpful because it gives a different flavor to the text.)

Peterson understands something about slow and urgent work. That's what paraphrasing the whole Bible takes. Some of us struggle with just reading it all. He read it. He reread it. He looked at multiple translations. He looked at Greek and Hebrew texts. He drafted and revised and prayed and listened and wrote and finished.

He had to start. He couldn't rush.

Between Matthew 2:23 and 3:1 there is nothing. This is 25 years of Jesus' life and we know

nothing. Years of being a teenager. Years of carpentry. Years of learning and teaching, questioning and answering.

We would love to know what happened, but Matthew gives us nothing. (When he tells his version of the story, Luke gives us one tantalizing glimpse of Jesus debating with religious scholars.)

Growth takes time. It happens outside the spotlight. It is measured in years and decades. As humans, we want feedback all the time. We want to know that we are getting close. We want to know that we are making progress. We want to know that what we are doing is making a difference. We want all the details.

When we don't see progress, we think that that maybe this, whatever the learning and living task is, doesn't matter after all. We don't start or we give up.

Following Jesus is a commitment *of* a life and a commitment *to* a life. Some of that life will be in the spotlight, with cool miracles. Some will be in the spotlight with opportunities for martyrdom. Most of it, however, years and decades, may be in slow quiet shaping.

But don't think it isn't urgent.

As I've talked about urgency, I realized that we often confuse urgent with frantic activity. We confuse urgent with serious faces. We confuse urgent with loud voices and high blood pressure.

I realized that can't always be true. The urgency of becoming like Christ, of following Jesus isn't marked by frantic serious loudness. It is marked with presence. A Christ follower wants to be with Christ.

But that still sounds pretty serious.

An example may help: The urgent desire of a Nancy Swanson follower is to be with Nancy (at least this Nancy follower). And I don't want to be with her to be frantic and serious and loud. I want to be with her to hear her laugh. I want to be with her to know what makes her smile and to do that and to smile, too. I want to be with her to talk about what matters to us both.

That's what I want when I think about following Christ, too.

I don't want to spend all my time being paranoid about what He will think. I don't want to spend my energy being frantic to keep Him happy the way some secretaries are about their bosses. I don't want to spend every waking moment wondering whether I will be good enough or perfect enough or happy enough. I don't want to waste the rest of my life measuring up to other disciples.

And I think that the Person who said,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke

upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30) would agree.

John the baptizer

(Matthew 3:1-12)

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." (Matthew 3:1)

The first word that John (the baptizer) says, as recorded by Matthew anyway, is 'repent.' I'm guessing that it wasn't the first word he ever spoke, mind you. John was fully human. He would have done and said everything that a child says and does. But John grew up knowing that he was fulfillment of a prediction.

When we listen to Luke tell the story of John's beginnings, we find

- that John's dad was in the temple,
- that he was doing spiritual work,
- that an angel told John's dad that John would be great in the eyes of everyone,
- that John would be like Elijah
- and that because dad wanted evidence that he could believe the angel, the angel shut his mouth until John was born.

John grew up hearing stories that told him that he had a calling and that arguing with angels has consequences.

When we think of the word "repent", we think of guys with beards saying "repent, the end is near." John's message feels very different: "repent, the kingdom of heaven is near." In the former case, repenting feels like judgment avoidance. In the latter, repenting feels like preparation, like getting ready for something wonderful.

The image of repenting is the image of turning around, of an about face. In the mouth of John, it means that we are going the wrong direction and if we turn around, we are heading toward the kingdom. And the king.

John is saying, "You know the way you are trying to do things? The way that is so frustrating and confusing and painful? The way that is so gut-twisting? How's that working? You could turn around, you know. You could open up to the king. He's near. "

People came to listen. People came to watch. A steady stream of people from Jerusalem.

Some saw no need to turn around and turned away. Others?

They turned around.

We want to know what to do.

Some of us, anyway, when we become part of a group or we have a new identity or we are starting fresh, we want to know what to do. We want to know what the rules are, what it takes to fit in, to measure up.

And then we look for examples. And some of us find John (the baptizing one). He's dressed in a garment woven from camel's hair with a leather belt. He eats locusts. He eats wild honey. And we think that we need to.

I mean, he's the spiritual one, right? He's the prophetic one. If we are prophetic, if we are to speak out the truth, we should live on the fringe. We should wear burlap and eat oddly.

But he didn't wear burlap. (It would have been more like wool.) And he may well have been the only one of Jesus' followers to eat bugs. The disciples will be found eating wheat and fish and bread and wine and other normal (for the time) food.

We want to copy outsides because that is so easy to do. But what made John distinctive wasn't what was on the outside. In fact, part of why he wore what he wore is that he didn't care so much about the outside. He wore what was available and durable.

There is much in Matthew that is descriptive: "This is what John did." We want to make it prescriptive: "This is what I should do." All the while, as we copy those things, we may miss what truly is prescriptive: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"

It is, after all, much easier to worry...than to follow.

Some people are really bad swimmers. That's why they take lessons.

They walk up to the registration desk at the YMCA and they say, "I can't swim. I don't know how to do a freestyle." And the guy at the desk says, "You'll have to get wet." And they say, "great." And they are really nervous about getting into the water, but they want to know how to swim.

Some people are really bad swimmers. That's why they laugh at the people taking lessons.

They look through the window by the pool and they say, "Who do you think you are, Michael Phelps? You look like a fool. You look like a walrus." (They aren't very kind.) They fold their arms and remember their grandfather's stories of his time in the Navy, his

wonderful service in the South Pacific, the honors he received. They remember how he was president of the Coast Guard Auxiliary for forty years, how everyone treated them special at the annual picnics (“You’re Abe’s grandkids? Let me tell you about the time...”)

Trouble is, they think that the stories make them swimmers. But the stories make you a storyteller. Swimming lessons make you a swimmer.

John (the baptizing one) was by the river. People would come to him. They would say, “My life is messed up. I’ve done this and this. I don’t want to do that.” And John would say, “Okay. Let’s go wash in the water. It will remind you of this day, this day when you said, ‘I want to change.’”

Lots of people came. Including religious people who simply watched. And made comments. And pretended to care.

John called them snakes. John knew that following God isn’t about telling stories about God. It’s about following. (And sometimes getting wet)

Wait. John called people snakes? That’s rude.

The people he called snakes were people who claimed to be godly. They were the religious people of the day, denominational leaders. They were the people who believed that they were closest to God.

John was saying, “Is your life messed up? Here’s what you do. Tell someone, and take a bath.” It was a symbolic, though still very wet, dip in a muddy river in front of everyone. The leaders were checking things out, coming to the river, not because they were wanting to get wet, but because they wondered what was happening. And John calls them snakes. He calls them deceptive ones. He calls them, well, he calls them names.

They, of course, had names for people like John. Heretic. Troublemaker. And they tended to punish people like him. (They called Jesus names, too.)

Tragically, the religious leaders probably had names for the people whom John was baptizing. Tragic, because they were criticizing the people who most needed help. They were sinners, but John was baptizing them anyway. They were broken, but John was willing help them toward wholeness.

We think of John being edgy and harsh, prophetic, abrupt. But he offered hope. And he offered it humbly. He acknowledged that he was not the main attraction. He was the warm-up act.

John gets the hierarchy clear when he says that he doesn’t deserve to carry the sandals of the one to come. Sandals that walked on camel paths. It’s a subtle, powerful message.

We are warm-up acts. Our calling isn't primarily to offer condemnation. It's to offer hope, to point to the One to come. John's life bought the right to critique the ones who should have been in the hope-giving business. He bought it by giving hope.

Baptism

(Matthew 3:13-17)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. Matthew 3:13

I talk with people. I usually understand what they are saying. In fact, I frequently translate what people are saying for the benefit of other people. I can translate from church to plain language. I can translate business to plain language.

Sometimes, though, I know all the words and I still can't translate the sentence, "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

That's what Jesus says to John (the baptizing one). Jesus has come to the Jordan River where John is baptizing people. Jesus gets in line. John says, "Me put you under? You should baptize me."

John's exactly right. Dunking someone in a river is pretty vulnerable, for the dunkee. It's a position of humility to be the one being washed. It's what people who were acknowledging wrong did to show that they wanted to change their direction.

And John knew that the person he'd been talking about was Jesus: the really powerful, really authoritative, really significant person from the previous sentences. So this made no sense. And then Jesus says, "it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

What? What does that mean, fulfill all righteousness?

David Turner, in a commentary I use, gives several possible answers that others have offered. Each tries to weave this sentence into the pages of the Bible that come before this sentence, or the pages that come after. Each reflects scholarship that leaves me humbly scuffing the dirt with my toe, a child in Bible study. No wonder our eyes sometimes glaze when we try to explain the Bible to people trying to understand for the first time.

That's okay. Sometimes you say, "maybe if I keep reading, I'll understand." Because stories, like people, make more sense the more you know them.

(Matthew 3:13-17)

The heavens parted.

We use that phrase jokingly when someone is about to make some dramatic

pronouncement. In the situation that Matthew talks about, there was a dramatic pronouncement. Though it is not a joke, it does feel pretty friendly.

The Father says of the Son, "I'm proud of him."

And then, while there is still a warm feeling, the scene changes. Jesus is led out into the desert. Jesus doesn't eat for forty days and nights. Satan shows up and suggests that Jesus make some bread out of the rocks.

We look at the story and we cheer for Jesus. We talk about how well he resists the temptation to turn well-baked stones into no-need-to-bake loaves. We sing about how he quotes Deuteronomy to the devil. But our optimism is because we are looking at the story long after the forty days are over. Let's look at this temptation from ground level.

Jesus gets the affirmation of his life. What he already knew to be true is stated to his cousin and whoever else was around. From a human perspective, this is as big an affirmation as you can have.

And then Jesus is directed to the desert. There is no food. And the next day, no food. And the next day, no food and the next day and the next. And then, when he was in the desert as long as Moses had been on the mountain, as long as Noah watched it rain, satan shows up.

Big high, long period of dryness, big confrontation.

It sounds exactly like the lives of many people I know. Just when they think that God loves them, stuff blows up. And they wonder where the love is.

But God's love isn't measured by weeks. Relationship never is. And Jesus understands.

Passing the test

(Matthew 4:1-11)

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. (Matthew 4:1)

Many people have memorized the Bible. Most people who watch sporting events have memorized John 3:16, for example.

But that doesn't mean they know what it means.

Some people have memorized parts of the Bible. From phrases to sentences to paragraphs to pages to whole books, people have memorized the Bible.

But that doesn't mean they know what it means.

Some people teach other people about the Bible. They can talk about how many books there are, how many versions have been written. They can talk about how many authors may have

written which books of the Bible. They can speak with great confidence.

But that doesn't mean they know what it means.

Some people can study in several languages. They have learned Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic and Latin. They can explain how the tenses of a particular verb mean this in the original language but were translated incorrectly by that group. As a result, they tell us, we have all been wrong for the last 1900 years about what Jesus really meant.

But that doesn't mean they know what it means.

Jesus was forty days into a fast. He was hungry. He needed food. Not wanted, needed. And forty days into this fast, the devil shows up to test him, to show him what it feels like to be human.

The devil reminds Jesus that Jesus has the power to turn stones into bread. (As will be seen later, Jesus could take a five dinner rolls and a couple of anchovies and feed 15,000 people.)

And Jesus says,

"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

In the face of adversity, to remember and say and live even one sentence our dad told us, is knowing what it means.

Jesus knew.

The devil says to jump.

That's what Matthew tells us in his description of the testing of Jesus.

You know the thing mothers are supposed to have said? When you say that everyone is doing something, they are supposed to say, "If everyone was jumping off a cliff would you jump?" We know enough to not respond to that kind of pressure.

But what if 'everyone' was quoting the Bible?

I mean, that's pretty authoritative, right? So if the Bible says "jump", then we should jump. But the Bible doesn't say to jump, particularly not in the passage that the devil quotes. The passage is about protection in the face of adversity, not willful leaping from tall buildings for the sake of defending God.

"What? For the sake of defending God? Where is that in the text?"

The devil quotes scripture. The implication is, if you really believe in God, you will do this. Otherwise you prove that you don't really believe God, that you don't trust him, that you aren't really a follower. You have to jump to defend God.

But here's the risk in this situation. It isn't in jumping off a building. It's in listening to single sentences out of context from known deceivers.

When a person known to lie about everything accuses someone of not being very Christian, what, exactly, does that mean we should do? Compared to how Jesus would have responded in the same setting?

When a person unfamiliar with any of the Bible says, "Aren't you supposed to love everyone? So why are you not helping me?" what exactly, does that mean we should do? Compared to how Jesus would have responded in the same setting?

Jesus will respond to the devil with a different passage, one used accurately. And, in that, a guideline: *read the whole book.*

"Don't test God."

That's what Jesus says to the devil.

The devil said to jump off the temple wall. He said that God had promised to send angels to catch people who were falling.

Jesus says, "It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Matthew 4:7)

Want to go exploring with me?

Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. But he left out part of the sentence. There Moses writes,

"Do not test the LORD your God *as you did at Massah.*"

So let's keep going. Deuteronomy 6 refers back to Exodus 17.

The Israelites were on their way from Egypt to Mount Sinai. More accurately, they were on their way where God was guiding them. They didn't know where exactly they were going, they just knew that they were following fire and a cloud. They discovered that they had come to a place where there wasn't any water. So they grumbled and quarreled with Moses.

Moses tells them to trust God. The God who brought them out of Egypt. The God who made a path through the sea. The God who had given them food, with very precise instructions that showed them that he would provide for them if they trusted.

But trusting wasn't what they did. They grumbled. And Moses said, "why do you put God to the test?"

God was testing their faith in him. He was giving them an opportunity to trust Him. But

rather than trusting, they were creating a test for him: give us water or we will question whether you are really God.

And the place was called testing, Massah. And forty years later Moses says to the people, "Don't test God like at Massah." And several centuries later, Jesus says to the devil, we're not supposed to test God like at Massah.

Binoculars.

That's what must have been on the top of the mountain, the mountain where the devil took Jesus. Those binoculars that are at tourist places. You put some quarters in. A shutter opens inside the huge odd-shaped metal blob. You look through the eyepieces and see a portion of the beauty in front of the vantage point. You may hear a soft ticking sound as a timer eats through the money. And then, suddenly, everything goes black.

You don't end up owning what you see, you just rent a view of it. You only see what the person who installed the binoculars wants you to see. You can't look behind you. You can't pick them up and follow a bird flying or those kids playing.

A limited view of infinity, for a few quarters.

That was the deal the devil was trying to make. There was, from the mountain, a wonderful view. "All the kingdoms of the world and their splendor," we read. All of that for a mere touching of the knee to the ground. Everything for nothing was the offer. Because worship is cheap. At least that was the claim.

The truth? The offer was nothing for everything. Stuff doesn't matter, is the claim within the offer. Relationship matters completely. The devil was willing to give up all the stuff for the relationship.

And who you have a relationship with makes all the difference.

And the relationship that Jesus affirms, that Jesus declares with a dismissal, is not with the devil: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

We often are offered binocular views of shiny objects with a similar offer: "All you have to do is just touch your knee to the ground." If worship is cheap enough to us, that deal seems simple.

And wrong.

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

How far will a text stretch to absorb the applications we try to make? We often take what

people say and we add to it, we misquote it, we leave words out, we add implications. It happens all the time in real life, in the life that we live as we walk around work.

But how far can we go when it comes to the words in the Bible? I mean, in the middle of testing Jesus, the devil cites Psalm 91. "He will command his angels" the devil says, telling Jesus to jump. And Jesus refuses.

And then we get to the end of this round of testing, and the devil leaves. And angels show up to take care of Jesus.

Here's the reason for asking about texts. When we go back to Psalm 91, it is about protection, it is about angels, it is about trampling on lions and snakes.

My symbolism side wants to say this: The devil is known as a serpent. The devil is known as a roaring lion. Psalm 91, quoted by the devil inappropriately, is acted out in this whole period of testing appropriately, with symbolic detail.

But I don't want to work too hard to make the connections. Part of the challenge of following, the challenge of obeying, is looking at the whole text, not just pieces. And so we have to be careful of flights of application fancy.

What we see acted out in the time of testing is that Jesus went through trials, he didn't disobey the Father, he quoted God's words to the devil, the devil left. Deuteronomy 6 and Exodus 7 and Psalm 91 have all been useful. And angels attended him.

Hmmm.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand

(Matthew 4:12-25)

From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

(Matthew 4:17)

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. It sounds like he was running away, at least if you look at geography.

John had been by the Jordan River. He was on the end of that river closest to Jerusalem. Closest to the authorities. Closest to the people in power that he was attacking. John got too critical, too specific. He was a bit too zealous in speaking truth to the political and spiritual powers. He got put in prison.

At the other end of the Jordan River was Galilee. It was as far from the authorities, as far from the people in power, as far from what anyone who mattered cared about as you could get and

still be in Israel.

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee.

It sounds, at first, like Jesus is running away, that he is quitting, that he is going home. He's been to see John. He's been to the wilderness. He's been to the devil and the angels.

And now he's going back home?

The expectation, the preparation, the affirmation, the initial confrontation—all that is done. The thirty years we know little of are over. Jesus had to get through them to get to this.

And this is what Isaiah said would happen. That is what Matthew says. This region of darkness would see a great light. The people living on the edge, culturally, would find the same hope that people huddling in darkness find at sunrise.

Many of us go to lots of places, learn lots of things, have lots of experiences. But at some point we have to go home and get started on what we are called to do. Preparation is important.

The "preparation *for what*" is essential.

And Christ followers have a *for what*.

It is so easy to imagine how things might have looked around Jesus.

We read that after John was arrested, Jesus went back to Galilee. From this time on, Matthew says, Jesus will start preaching exactly the same message that John was preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

We see this as a scene from a movie. A man is preaching a challenging message. He gets hauled off to jail. There is a moment of silence. Everyone wonders what will happen, who will take up the banner, who will take his place. And then, in the distance, we see one person. Hesitantly, at first, almost timidly, we hear the battle cry of the first man in a squeaky voice.

"Yes," we think, "someone will do this. It will be tough but there is a new messenger." And we would have been captivated by our familiarity with one version of hero stories. And we would be wrong.

When Jesus heads to Galilee and with a strong voice begins to proclaim what John had been saying, we realize that this isn't the second generation in the family business. This isn't the timid cousin. This isn't some guy suddenly thrust into prominence.

Far from it.

This is a guy who willingly had John baptize him, not because of sin but because of identification. This is a guy who rebuffed the temptations of the enemy of our souls.

This is a guy who had a voice from heaven and a dove and angels. Here's the image I have:

There's a concert. The warm-up band is on stage, doing covers of the main band's anthem. The headliner walks around the back of the hall listening. Getting ready. Gauging the audience.

And when he takes the stage, no one's confused.

Words or actions.

Saying or doing.

Black or white.

Regular or decaf.

Preach always. If necessary use words.

Do what I say AND what I do.

We are always, it seems, faced with choices, faced with dichotomies, given two choices. If you aren't this, you must be that.

And it is really hard to choose, because sometimes we want both and sometimes we want neither. A great example is preaching and healing. One we don't want to do. One we can't. We don't want to come across as preachy. That feels uncomfortable, grating. And there are bad connotations about preaching. It seems judgmental, somehow.

We can't heal anyone. We can pray, with some confidence, we suppose, but most of us are unable or unwilling to look at a guy begging and tell him that we don't have any money, but we will give him healing.

And yet, that very combination of activities is what Jesus was doing at the beginning of his work:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Five chapters later (9:35), we will read almost exactly the same words, suggesting that these were things that characterized the work of Jesus.

He explained what things meant, the texts that they had been using their whole lives. He proclaimed the good news, that there was good news. He made people well. He worked with bodies and with hearts and with minds. His life was about whole people.

What does it mean for those of us who are comfortable with one or the other of the things that Jesus did that he was about all of it? Healing is good, but not enough. Preaching is good, but not enough. Teaching is good, but not enough.

I've started reading about word of mouth marketing. It's helpful to understand how to get people talking about what you are offering. If you put up a billboard or run an advertising campaign or mail something to a thousand houses, that is you talking about you. And while talking about yourself can be helpful in providing information, it isn't nearly as compelling as other people talking about you.

Jesus was teaching and preaching and healing. News about him spread. It went north. It went east. It went south. People were coming from all around to get healed. And to get free. The news was all by word of mouth. People were talking about what Jesus was doing and saying. And everyone wanted to come to him.

What was the secret? Why did everyone talk about him with such effectiveness that people came from everywhere?

He said and did what people needed.

The people who were coming had no hope for any other solution for their sicknesses.

They had no money to afford what care existed. They had no options.

When there aren't any other options, when there isn't any reason for hope, the words of Jesus, or more importantly, the actions of Jesus, are incredibly inviting. We go to where we think there will be some healing, some hope.

Often Christ followers think their job is to talk other people into thinking that they have holes in their hearts. What was clear from this part of Jesus' ministry was that people who have holes in their hearts and lives actually go looking for Jesus.

Maybe our job isn't to convince people of how much they hurt. Maybe it's to talk about our own story of healing. And that's word of mouth.