

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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If most of us were asked to tell the story of our life—our autobiography—we'd probably begin by talking about our childhood, our earliest memories of growing up. Or, maybe we'd begin by describing the circumstances of our birth—where and when it all happened, even though we don't actually recall the event. But we probably wouldn't begin our story by noting that our grandfather was a farmer or that our parents met on a blind double date with friends. After all, this is a story about *my* life.

So it's all a little strange that the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, which we heard proclaimed, describes itself as, "the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," and then doesn't mention him again in this reading. Instead it tells the story of his ancestor, Isaiah the Prophet, who lived 700 years before and who went about preaching the need to prepare the way of the Lord. And then it tells the story of his herald/messenger, John the Baptist, who wandered around in the desert talking about someone more important than himself who would come after him. But the name "Jesus" is never uttered, probably because the men didn't know that name themselves.

What are we to make of all this—the proclamation of a man's life in which the man himself is absent, at least for the moment? At least two things can be gleaned from this, I think. One involving Jesus, and one involving those of us who seek to find and follow him.

First about Jesus himself. His story did not begin with his adult ministry, and it did not even begin with his birth. (There is no birth story in the Gospel of Mark.) Instead, the biography of Jesus began in the deep history of Israel, in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David. As a human being, Jesus was no different from any of the rest of us. He was not an alien. He belonged to a people, a religion, a culture, a long family history that couldn't help but shape his own life story, and who he understood himself to be in this world, including his relationship with God. Just as **we** did not emerge into this world from a vacuum, either. You and I are who we are in large part because of decisions that were made by our ancestors hundreds of years ago—their fortunes and failures, whom they chose to marry and what they chose to believe about God and religion, where they chose to live and what they regarded as important.

So now it starts to become more clear why the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God, requires the telling first of the story of Isaiah, and later of John the Baptist. Nobody completely creates his own life story out of nothing, not even Jesus. We are tied to our histories in ways that we often can't imagine or even know about. Birth is not the beginning.

And, second, what does this absence of Jesus from the Gospel of Jesus mean for those of us who are seeking to be good enough disciples of this man? It tells us that we will never recognize him unless we are already attentive to a whole lot of **other** people who invite us to prepare our hearts to welcome him, and who teach us how to do that. St. Mark's gospel is convinced that Jesus Christ will not be much noticed or be alluring to people who have not first noticed and followed the prophets who came before. And although John the Baptist is clear that disciples should not follow *him* as their savior, they very much need to *listen* to him as their guide to recognize who *is* the true Messiah. It begins, he says, with the repentance of sin and baptism in water. That's not yet the whole story, and some of it isn't even very new as a message in Israel, but unless you are open to the voices of the prophets, you cannot hope to discover him when he comes, because you won't know whom you're looking for. The story of Jesus **for us** begins with, and includes, a lot of people other than Jesus, the ones who urge us to conform our lives to our religious tradition, our church, and the witness of those multitudes of faithful Christians and Jews who have gone before us and made us who we are together. Nobody comes to discover

Jesus all by himself/herself, not even those who *claim* to do that—in fact, *especially* not those who claim to do that. Our Christian story began long before there was any such thing as a so-called “Christian Church.” Just as the story Jesus Christ began long before a baby was born in Bethlehem. Just as the story of our own lives began long before the date of our birth certificate.

God has been sending his word into the world from the very beginning, and he is still doing it today. There are prophets among us right here who can lead us to the Christ if we will first be open to listening to *them*, together, with discernment and wisdom. Some of them are parents, teachers, preachers, children, elders, the poor, strangers, friends, enemies, or eccentrics like John the Baptist with his strange clothes and weird diet. Any of them is capable of leading us to Jesus. His story didn’t begin with him. It’s all about him, and it is Him alone whom we welcome as Messiah, but he doesn’t arrive unannounced. Let us be attentive to his advance people, both those who came before us and right now.