

**Sermon Title:** "Thirty"  
**Scriptures:** Isaiah 43:1-3a, Luke 3:15-23a  
**Location:** Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church  
**Date:** January 13, 2019 Baptism of the Lord Sunday  
**Preacher:** Grace Boyer

"Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work." (Luke 3:23a)

I remember my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday clearly. I was living in Danville, KY. The church staff loved to find a chance at least twice a year to have a meal together, and my birthday was the perfect opportunity that summer. We found someone to answer the church phone, piled into the church van, and headed a short ways out of our small town to a restaurant that was known not for the quality of its food, but for its personality. To give you a sense, we were led to the "Purple Room" for our lunch together, a room where everything was a different shade of purple and lavender: cups, plates, napkins, walls, lights, flowers....you get the picture. I was given a coffee mug with "Congratulations you are 30" written on it, something I kept until I was 48, when I thought perhaps, perhaps it was time to let it go. I remember being filled with two distinct feelings on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday: one was a sense of reaching a milestone in life, the other was of not feeling one bit different than the day before.

There is something relative about age. It is less about the actual chronological age and more about the age one feels or the attitude about life that counts. But we still do have those mile markers in life don't we: 16 (driver's license), 18 (vote), 21 (drinking), 30, 50, 65, and what is the next? 80 or 100?

When Luke writes that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work, it was not just a passing remark. It was intentional. First we need to remember the life expectancy at that time: 75% of all people born were dead by their mid-twenties, and 90% were dead by their 40's. In New Testament times, life moved quickly. People married in their teens, and by the time you were 30 you could be a grandparent. So to be 30 was to be a mature person in the community.

But Luke was not just trying to say that Jesus was of a mature age. Luke is making the point that Jesus was following all the Jewish religious and cultural customs of the day, something that was really important to the writer of Luke. What do I mean? In Luke chapter 2 we learn that Jesus was named and circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day according to the religious law, he was presented in the temple at 1 ½ months as a firstborn child according to the religious law, and he was recognized at age 12 as a man in the temple, what is now in modern times referred to as bar mitzvah. One of the next major days in the life a Jewish man of that time (except for perhaps his marriage day and birth of a child) was when he reached 30.

At thirty you could enter the public sphere or follow your calling. Up until 30 you tended to your parents and family, worked in the family business, but at 30 you could make a choice about your life, how you wanted to spend it in the community.

I have wondered what the parallel age is in our modern culture? Is it in your early twenties as you start your career? Or is it about a mid-life correction at age 50? Or deciding what you want to do in your retirement years? Would love to hear what you think the parallel would be.

Jesus had been obedient and respectful to his earthly parents, perhaps working in the family carpentry business, but when 30 came, he was free to follow his own call. Luke is saying, Jesus fulfilled all the dots, dashes, and requirements of his human Jewish customs. "Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work."

In contrast was Jesus' relative, John the Baptist. They were the same age, with John being about 6 months older. But John had been marked at birth as given to God, destined to live a different type of life as a prophet. Early on he went out into the wilderness with camel skin clothes and eating locust and wild honey. But it was about the time he hit thirty that he began to fulfill the prophecy from Isaiah of a voice crying out in the wilderness: "prepare the way of the Lord." John was preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. His style was blunt and direct, he didn't mince words. He called the religious leaders who came to him, "you brood of vipers!" He spoke firmly and practically to his diverse audience about turning their lives around.

To tax collectors he said, don't cheat. To soldiers he said, don't abuse your power. To common people he said, if you have two of anything share it with someone who has none. His authenticity was such that crowds began to gather around him in the wilderness at the Jordan River.

There was an energy and excitement about John the Baptist, and people began to wonder if he was the messiah, a fresh word from God. But John is direct again, saying that he is only the messenger, that there will be another, and that John was unworthy to even untie his sandals like a servant would.

John instead begins to point to Jesus' future ministry. He uses an agricultural image of a threshing floor that might sound strange or even violent today. But John's listeners would have understood the imagery and the good news of it. That at the harvest time the grain would be taken to a flat threshing floor to be separated from the hulls and stalks. And that the farmers would take a winnowing fork to throw the mixture up into the air, and the heavy grain would fall to the floor while the light hulls and stalks would be blown away by the wind and swept up to fuel the fire. Every kernel of grain was important to the survival of the farmer's family, so every precious kernel was gathered up for the winter.

I had a glimpse of this preciousness from my childhood in South Korea. At the time South Korea was still a poor and hungry country. No grain of rice was ever wasted. You gathered up every rice grain you saw, even if it fell to the dirt road or the floor. And you ate or saved every cooked morsel. And even to this day, I have a tendency to get my chopsticks to make sure I don't waste a single grain of rice. My husband can testify to this. In the same way, every kernel of wheat or barley grain would have been important to the farming peasants of Jesus' time.

It is as if John is saying to these folks who came to the river, each one of you is a precious kernel of grain, and will be gathered up by the messiah for safe keeping. And all that is hulling you in, binding you up, keeping you down in this current Roman occupied, land foreclosing, dignity stealing, debt crushing world will be blown away by the wind of the Spirit and burned up as fuel. That was good news then. And looking at our world today, it may be good news even now?!

In Luke, the transition between John's ministry and Jesus' is almost like the handoff of a baton. When John is about 30 he is thrown into prison for criticizing King Herod, and John's ministry comes to an end with his death in prison. When Jesus is about 30 he takes up the baton, begins his ministry, and continues on the road that has been prepared for him by John. Both men being faithful in their own ways. One by following the customs of the day, the other by flying in the face of some of those customs. But each faithful to their call.

Right in the middle of this baton handoff we hear of Jesus' baptism, almost as an afterthought. Luke just records that it happened. "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized." That is all we get. Jesus stood in the long lines going for John for baptism in the river Jordan, just like the rest of the sea of humanity. But afterwards, while he was praying, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove and God spoke claiming him as his beloved son. At age 30 Jesus' public work began.

This Sunday is known as “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday. In it we remember Jesus’ baptism, and also our own. Whether our baptism was with water as a baby, child, or adult. Or if our baptism was simply internal, no water involved, God simply taking hold of us and not quite letting go as we wander through the crazy journey of life that brought us here.

Presbyterian’s speak of baptism as a visible sign of an invisible grace, or an outward sign of an inward grace. What that means, is that before we can even cry out for God or call God’s name, God reaches out to hold us and gather us in as beloved. Baptism with water is a public acknowledgement of what has already been taking place, even if it is has taken a while for us to realize it. In Baptism we acknowledge that we are God’s beloved children. In baptism we are set apart and called for service in the world, whatever our age. Whatever our age.

If you are a child, share kindness. If you are student, dedicate each class you take to God and watch out for the vulnerable. If you work, be a vessel for God’s love in whatever field you find yourself in. If you are retired, unemployment, caregiving, or just trying to make it on your own, let God live in you, breathe in you, and be a presence in the world through you.

Some of us, like John and Jesus are at that biblical age of 30 ready for the next calling or phrase of life, whether that is exciting or scary. Some of us are still too filled with the responsibilities of life to do so. We are each on our own journeys.

But together, as the church, the church as a whole, we are always 30. Always at that age of public ministry. Always called to live out Jesus’ first sermon in Luke of good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and God’s year of favor and debt release. Always being called to help people know that they are as precious a kernel of grain, a grain of rice, gathered in. As a church, it is always the right time to speak and to act.

So church, let us remember our baptism. Whatever has gotten us here today. Whatever has gotten us to our own River Jordan. Water pouring down, spirit living and working through each and every one of us as a community, if we have eyes to see, ears to listen, and the heart to let it happen. You are my own, my chosen, my beloved, says God.