

Sermon: Yogi Jesus
Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: January 8, 2017

Over the last few weeks, we have been proceeding through our scriptures from the birth of Jesus on Christmas, to the coming of the Wise Men on Epiphany and now we are at the Baptism of Jesus. I don't know if anyone noticed, but we made quite a leap from last week to this week, basically from Jesus as infant to Jesus as 30-year old man! There is one intervening story in all those years that shows up in the Gospel of Luke, alone, where we catch sight of Jesus at age 12 sparring with rabbis in the Jerusalem temple, but after that brief passage the next time we see Jesus is at his baptism when he is about 30. There's nothing about Jesus between the ages of 12 and 30, no account of anything. It's hard to imagine that if Jesus was around Palestine during those 18 years that there wouldn't have been some noteworthy event recorded about him? But there's nothing.

However...there was this little-known man from Russia named Nicholas Notovitch who lived at the end of the 19th century and believed he knew exactly where Jesus was during those years. Notovitch traveled throughout India and was deeply stirred by the wonders of India's ancient civilization. But the sacred stories that gripped his soul most deeply during his travels were the ones he heard about a person that the Indian people referred to as Saint Issa in whom, "was manifest the soul of the universe." This great saint wandered and taught throughout India and regions around the Himalayas from the age of 14 to the age of 28 at which point, the stories say, he returned to his native land of Palestine to bring his message there. It

was there, that Saint Issa was treated vilely, condemned, and put to death by his own people.

It wasn't a big leap for Nicholas to decide that Saint Issa was none other than Jesus of Nazareth and that here lay the answer to the riddle of Jesus' lost years. After hearing these stories by word of mouth for many years, Nicolas in the 1880's learned that there were ancient manuscripts in a Tibetan monastery in Ladakh that supposedly contained written accounts of Saint Issa's years sojourning through India, Nepal and Tibet. He was determined to see these manuscripts for himself so he journeyed northward through the treacherous land of Tibet to the Himis Monastery. The Buddhist monks there received him graciously but would not let him see the manuscripts. Gravely disappointed he began his return journey towards India where at some mountain pass he fell and broke his leg. Passersby picked him up and returned him to the monastery where he stayed to recover. During his recovery, after repeated requests, the monks finally agreed to let him see the sacred books and with the help of an interpreter he meticulously copied the contents of the pages that related to Jesus as they were read to him by the head monk.

Despite Nicholas' wild enthusiasm and passion for what he had uncovered, he found upon his return to Europe that Western Christendom was none too happy to embrace what he had found. He ended up publishing the notes himself in 1894 under the name of "The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ." The publication was discredited by American and European critics though confirmed by two Hindu men who on separate occasions did the same journey and came away from the monastery with the same account of Saint Issa, the young master who sojourned throughout India meeting with monks, saints and pundits and sharing his message. The ancient manuscript

that Nicholas copied suggests that Jesus became learned in all the Vedas and Shastras, the Hindu holy books, and openly denounced Hindu practices of caste bigotry and many of their priestly rituals. The manuscript says that while he was among the Buddhists, Jesus studied their sacred texts and could perfectly expound from them. It also related that at about the age of 26 or 27 he continued preaching his message abroad as he wended his way back to Israel through Persia and adjacent countries, encountering fame from the populace and animosity from the Zoroastrian and other priestly classes. p. 80-87. The connections are remarkable between this Saint Issa and Jesus Christ. Could this be why there is no account of him in Palestine during this time? Because he wasn't there.

But what does serve us to consider this particular theory that many say is bunk and some swear is the truth and more specifically how does it bring us to where we are today in considering the baptism of Jesus? Well, for one it requires that we broaden our often too limited understanding and approach to this magnificent figure of Jesus Christ. The Hindu guru Paramahansa Yogananda, writing in the first half of the 20th century, wrote a large work on Jesus Christ from the Hindu perspective (called: The Second Coming of Christ, The Resurrection of the Christ Within You: a revelatory commentary on the original teachings of Jesus). His reflections arise from the assumption that Jesus had a significant connection with the people and religious traditions of India. He says of Jesus' teachings that "they were born internally from his God-realization and nurtured externally by his studies with the masters and express the universality of the Christ-consciousness that knows no boundary of race or creed...."

But more specifically, Yogananda believed that Jesus is the bridge between the East and the West. We in the West lose sight of the fact that

Jesus was an Oriental Christ, a person from the East not an Occidental or European Christ from the West. Let me read to you in Yogananda's own words:

Like the sun which rises in the East and travels to the West spreading its rays, so Christ rose in the East and came to the West, there to be enshrined in a vast Christendom whose adherents look to him as their guru and savior. It is no happenstance that Jesus chose to be born an Oriental Christ in Palestine. This locale was the hub linking the East with Europe. He traveled to India to honor his ties with her rishis, preached his message throughout that area, and then went back to spread his teachings in Palestine, which he saw in his great wisdom as the doorway through which his spirit and words would find their way to Europe and the rest of the world. This great Christ, radiating the spiritual strength and power of the orient to the West, is a divine liaison to unite God-loving peoples of East and West.... p.89

He goes on to explain how the East and West need each other and his words in many ways explain the great popularity of practices like Yoga and Buddhist meditation in our Western countries:

The great message of Jesus Christ is living and thriving in both East and West. The West has concentrated on perfecting the physical conditions of man, and the East on developing the spiritual potentials of man. Both East and West are one-sided. Granted the East is not practical enough; but the West is too practical to be spiritually practical!... Without spiritual idealism, material practicality is the harbinger of selfishness, sin, competition, and wars. This is a lesson for the West to learn. But unless spiritual idealism is tempered with practicality, there is confusion and suffering and lack of natural progress. This is the lesson to be learned by the East...Is it not strange that, perhaps due to God's secret plan, since the East needs material development, it was invaded by Western material civilization? And since the west needs spiritual balance, it has been silently but surely 'invaded' by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy?" p.93

Jesus, in Yogananda's view, is an Eastern Christ bringing God-realization to the West. Think of the shift that this requires of our tradition - instead of Jesus Christ being the inspiration for conquering the god-less East, Jesus Christ is the inspiration by which we can be in union with our Hindu and Buddhist brothers and sisters in the East! Instead of Jesus Christ being a hindrance to unity, Jesus Christ is the catalyst for it! How can we read our very own scriptures and know our Lord in any other way?! He must be the point of connection not antagonism between ourselves and others. His Spirit must cultivate kinship not antipathy! His teachings must lead us into solidarity not rivalry! Surely this is the Jesus we know in our hearts and in our souls!

In our gospels Jesus is pictured sparring in a temple in Palestine with his Jewish rabbis at the age of 12. The very next appearance from Jesus is when he is baptized by John in the River Jordan. Jesus returns from an 18 year absence and the very first thing he does is he walks into the river for a ritual cleansing, a practice of the Hebrews that John the Baptist was fond of but that had its ancient origins where? In India, with the ritual cleansing in the Ganges. And not only does Jesus walk into that river, but he commends it to us, he tells us in the West too to walk into the river as our Eastern brothers and sisters do and by the same waters of God's grace to be cleansed.