

A passionate and humorous story of Jesus sent by a Father who is not the architect and CEO of hell. If there is no hell, then what was the mission of Jesus? For the answer, read this book.

Jesus, Man on a Mission

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JESUS, MAN ON A MISSION

James La Croce

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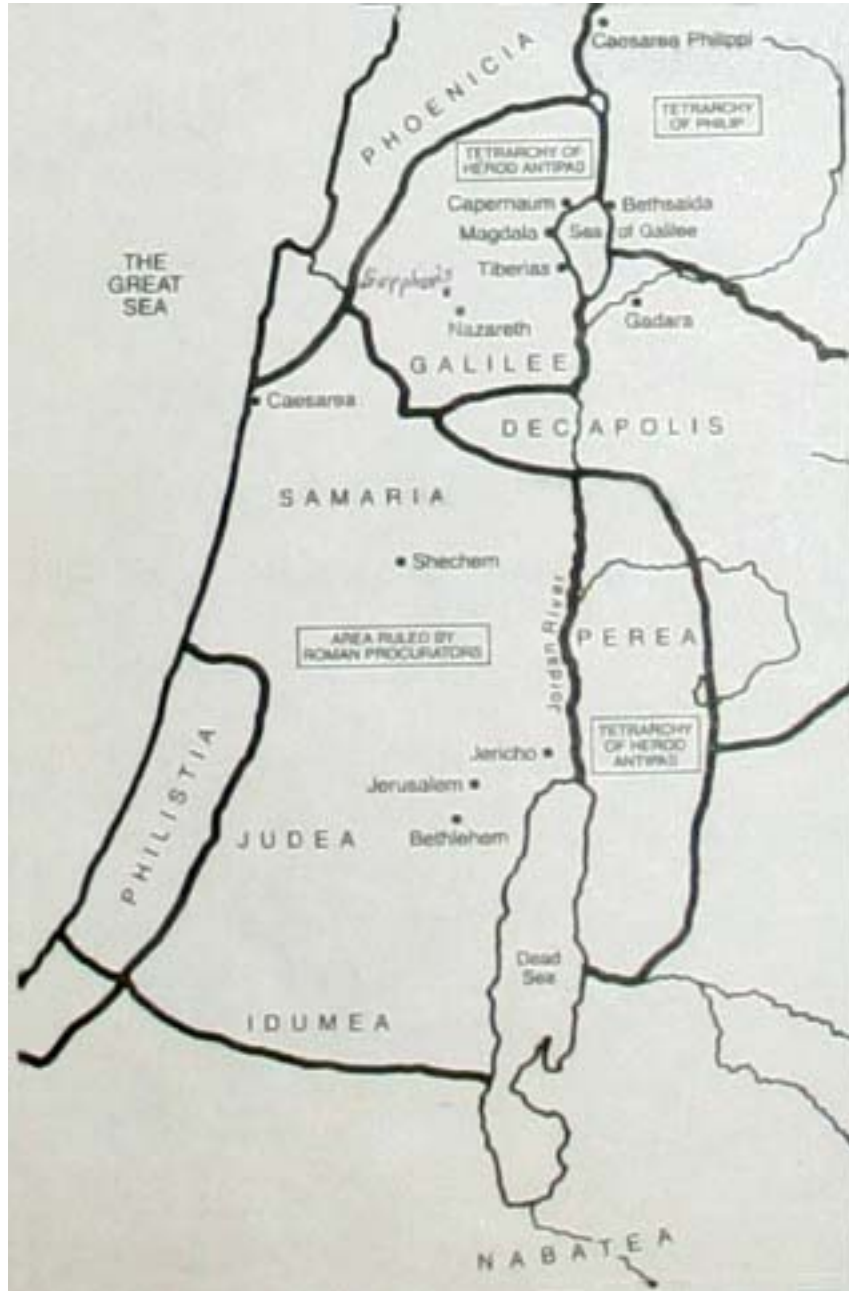
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ACT ONE: ON THE MARK!

“Preach the Gospel
at all times.
If necessary,
use words.”

St. Francis of Assisi

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SCENE ONE: BOY JESUS
(The Temple)

Occasional background comments by the author, such as the following, will be made under this heading:

PARDON THE INTERRUPTION

I begin my story with an incident in which Jesus is clearly in the wrong. I do so because someone who is always right most likely will have little or no sense of humor - other than laughing at the mistakes of others.

Narrator: Joseph, Mary and Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. Jesus intended to spend the first few days of the return trip with the family of his cousin John. But he was so taken up with his discussions with the temple priests that he stayed behind without bothering to tell his parents. When found after three days Jesus is scolded by his mother, and rightly so:

Mary: (putting Jesus in his place) Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching three days for you. We were frantic."

Jesus: (showing no regrets, shedding no tears, making no apologies) Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?

Mary: (deeply hurt) You should have told your father and me that you needed more time in the temple. Instead you speak to me as if I were the clueless child.

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Narrator: Luke does not chastise Jesus. His Gospel tends to put Jesus in the best possible light. On the cross Luke has Jesus commending his spirit to God while Mark and Matthew have him crying out as feeling godforsaken.

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You and I can rightly chastise the behavior of Jesus in this story. At his age he should have known better than to cause such pain to his parents, and then dare show disdain by suggesting the fault was theirs not his. Just because he was Jesus did not make it right.

I thank Luke for this story of Jesus being in the wrong because it suggests that boy Jesus had the makings of a sense of humor.

With that point in mind the following interplay between Jesus and the Temple priests dares to imagine that the business boy Jesus attended to in the temple, on behalf of his father, was that of attacking the mirth-killing belief in hell.

“After three days they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

Luke 2: 46-47

Boy Jesus: (with childish enthusiasm and energy)
Surely you temple priests know that the prophets were sent to manhandle the kings, priests, and lawmakers. They know how to threaten and punish in the name of God but do not know how to honor God's name

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by putting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly.

First temple priest: (sarcastically) Surely you know that fear is the highest honor we can pay to God's name - as is taught by kings, priests and lawmakers. Surely you know that no one can threaten or punish more than God. Surely you know about hell.

Boy Jesus: (shaken by the suggestion that his father's business required a hell) If there is a hell God would have to let us know about it in no uncertain terms. Everyone in every part of the world would have to know, FOR SURE, that there is a hell. That would only be fair.

Second temple priest: (with warmth and kindness) All twelve-year-old boys are obsessed with fairness. Otherwise they could not play their childish games. It has always been so and will always be so. But now that you have celebrated your bar mitzvah you must begin to think like a man.

Third temple priest: (encouraging Jesus) Your point about proof is well taken, Jesus. But there can be no proof because there is no hell. There is no hell for God to show us. The Promised Land is our heaven and our hell. The Torah tells us so.

Jerusalem Rabbi: (clearly alarmed) How can you say that? The prophets prove you wrong. Isaiah told the king of Babylon he would end up in hell, along with the nobility of Jerusalem. Ezekiel tells us that the uncircumcised killed by the sword will end up in hell. Even in the Torah God told Moses that the ground would swallow up the wicked of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. They and all that belong to them went straight to hell.

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Visiting Rabbi: (disdain dripping from his lips) My colleague from Jerusalem must learn to distinguish poetry from pronouncements. No wonder this boy's eyes are about to pop out of his head. If we took our sacred texts literally Israel would be the largest outdoor insane asylum.

Third temple priest: (calmly and with intense carefulness) Some of our best teachers today are working on a more amiable version of what happens after death. We are leaving behind the ruthless and reckless rhetoric so popular with the supposedly pious among us.

Narrator: Those who heard Boy Jesus in the Temple were grateful for the dialogue provoked by his boyhood sense of fair play. Jesus himself was done in by the intensity of those three days. He had knocked himself out defending the good name of his heavenly Father. That is why Jesus, who deeply loved his parents, did not have the emotional energy to embrace them with apologies and tears. That is why he spoke to his parents as if they were clueless children.

Still, it was wrong for him to do so. And he knew it to be wrong. It was a stumble he would never forget. But it did serve to help him develop a sense of humor.

Perhaps he was familiar with the saying: "Paradise belongs to him who makes his companions laugh." (The Talmud?)

SCENE TWO: THE BAPTISM
(The Jordan River)

PARDON THE INTERRUPTION

Readers cannot be reminded often enough that the Gospels are stories not histories. They were written many decades after the events. They were written in such a way that it is often difficult to know when, where, or whether this or that incident took place. Did Jesus cleanse the temple at the end of his ministry (as Mark, Matthew and Luke tell us) or at the beginning of his ministry (as John tells us)? Clearly each writer had his own reasons for telling the story as he did. I too have my reasons for the way I organize my story. It features a Jesus whose mission is to usher in the kingdom of God in Galilee.

Day One: Desert Storm

Narrator: The desert did no favors for John. It gave him a relentless rather than a religious look. He was good company for no one as his words did not flow easily from a dry and sticky mouth. He hoarded them for his preaching. Humor, always good for the soul, was not easy to come by in the desert. If one wanted to whip himself and others into a frenzy, the desert was the place to do it.

John was a desert storm. Even today his tirades afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. The afflicted who came to hear John preach loved to refer to him as John the Baptist, or J.B., since it was his baptism that gave them hope that the kingdom of God would soon come to their land. Unfortunately, they believed it would come by the power of God rather than by the power of their love.

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PARDON THE INTERRUPTION

Any of the following dialogue that may be familiar to you is taken from Luke 3: 1-22.

J.B.: (with desert-heated words)

Caesar take care! Roman peace is not enough!

God is going to take from Caesar what belongs to God!

Israel take care! Circumcision is not enough!

God is demanding a baptism of repentance for Israel.

Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So too with you, planted by God to bear fruit in his kingdom on earth.

The Crowd: What should we do? What is the fruit that will save us from the axe of God? What is the fruit that will make our land the kingdom of God? What is the goodness that God demands of us so ferociously?

J.B.: You there with two coats! And you with those loaves of bread! Are you ready to give half of what you have to someone in need? Can you learn to live with less without feeling you are betraying your wife and kids?

You there trying not to be noticed! You are obviously a tax collector with the looks you are getting from those around you. Can you stop taking more than is prescribed by the law? Can you learn to live with less and like it?

You soldiers! You love to strut and threaten. Can you stop extracting money by threats? Can you learn to live without being bullies and suffer the sarcasm of your fellow soldiers?

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Don't bother giving me *the look*. Do I look like a reed that can be shaken by the wind?

You Pharisees and Sadducees! You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? You call Abraham your father. God could make better children of Abraham from stones. I have warned the people to beware of your yeast. Your bread does not rise. It does not feed the hungry.

Day Two: Old Man River

There was no better river than the Jordan for John's baptisms. This storied river parted like the Red Sea when Joshua led the Israelites in crossing it. The Jordan helped David escape from his enemies, washed away the leprosy of Naaman the Syrian, and reeked of graces that graced the lives of those freed from slavery. No river could have served John's kingdom message more than the Jordan and its storied history.

J.B.: (zoning in on the afflicted) You country and city folk! You who have come from Jerusalem and the towns of Judea! The water from this river will not wash away your evil inclinations. Wash in it a hundred times and you will sin again. Nor will it heal your bodies. The healing of Naaman in its waters was to show you God's heart not his plan of salvation.

But the water from the Jordan will seal your promise to live a life that will help make life worth living for every son and daughter of God in Galilee and Judea. In God's kingdom you are nobody until you love everybody. Believe in this kingdom. If you do, you will be on the right side of history.

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Angry soldier: (raising and shaking his spear) All pious preachers believe they are on the right side of history, meaning the side that is best for their piety. Caesar is on the right side of history. He who is not for Caesar is against Caesar. You are the Anti-Caesar!

Angry rabbi: (tearing his garments) You are a false prophet! Our Patriarchs, our temple, our sacrifices, our Torah, and our Prophets are preparing us for the Messiah. You are the Anti-Messiah!

The Crowd: (on an emotional high because of John's put-down of the soldier and the rabbi) Baptize us, baptize us! J.B., J.B., you're our man! If you can't save us nobody can!

Narrator: John's animal-like clothes of camelhair and leather had alerted and aroused the crowd as would a prowling beast. His words, stinging like a swarm of locusts, stripped away all their 'buts', 'ifs', 'however's', and 'maybes'. But adoring crowds made John nervous. It is a known fact that such crowds expect more from their idols and rituals than can ever be delivered.

J.B. became even more agitated when he spotted Jesus in the crowd. He was disturbed that Jesus who had never made a public stand on anything was now here at a time of such great danger. Pulling Jesus aside he arranged to meet him the next day, in a secluded place, away from the crowd.

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Day Three: Which Way?

Narrator: The cousins kiss and embrace, ask about each other's family and then get right to John's question: If you go public, which way will you go?

J.B.: (clearly agitated) Jesus, why are you here with me now? Don't you know that Herod is on the prowl? Being here could be dangerous to your health. Herod's storm troopers will be here any day now.

Jesus: (calm and cool) Why are you so upset? I'm old enough to decide whether or not I want to be here. Besides, it's not your fault that Herod is on the rampage.

J.B.: (impatient and contrite) That's just it. It is my fault. I lost my head when I ranted and raved about him sleeping with his brother's wife. I should have stayed on message. Sex is not the problem, selfishness is. That's why I am preaching in the desert and not pounding at the gates of Herod's Palace. If God's people would shape up the kingdom will come. But like their oppressors, they oppress one another. They do to others what they do not want done to them. With more time I might even get my message across to most of Galilee. I am running out of time because the devil made me go into Herod's bedroom!

Jesus: (embracing J.B.) Take it easy, John. I know that bed-shenanigans are not as bad as bread-shenanigans. But the people loved it when you tore into Herod. Herod is a bread-shenanigan guy, big time. When my time comes I hope I can stand up to him face to face. You have me all fired up. That's one reason I am here.

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But, you are too hard on the people. We have been specially graced, they have not. If we had their upbringing we would react much as they do. The people must be helped not harassed. So ease up on the whip, dear cousin.

J.B.: (pushing Jesus away) There you go again! Mr. Softie. Never mind. This is my territory, my problem. I suggest you hightail it from here. Today, pronto!

Narrator: J.B. knew Jesus was a Godsend much greater than himself, but in those days it was believed proper to speak to someone sent by God, and even to God, as one saw fit. They believed it always paid to be candid.

Jesus: (clearly distraught) You mean run away? Is that how little you think of your cousin? Do you want me to abandon you, to play the wimp?

J.B.: (embracing Jesus) Jesus, do not knock wimps. Sometimes they can make a difference between victory and defeat. Wimps can buy time by not getting into the power game. This is not the time for you to play by the rules of the mighty. Thanks to you I can talk to you like a cousin. But deep in my heart I know am not worthy to tie the laces of your sandals. My time has come and gone. Yours is just beginning. I feel it in my bones. I know you do too. You waited thirty years for the right moment to make your move. For God's sake, and I mean that literally, don't blow it now!

Narrator: J.B. sees Jesus wavering. He tries to pump him up by reminding him of some key kingdom moments in their history –

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the escape from slavery, the return from exile, the rebuilding of the temple. He ends with a zinger:

J.B.: (playing the rabbi) By God's hand a Jewish woman became queen of Persia and saved her people from annihilation. If God can do that with a woman what can he do with the likes of you? What I have started you must finish. You must become the final 'No' to the *Pax Romana*. Your mission is to preach the kingdom of God on earth as Israel's prophets see it not as Rome's Caesar sees it. Don't lose your head. Be prudent. I slipped up badly when Satan tempted me to bring down the big guy by way of his bedroom.

Jesus: (clearly moved) I know how it is JB. Satan has already been tempting me to fight power with power. I know I will be tempted again. If I can just bring myself to say 'no' to that temptation, it will be my greatest grace.

J.B.: (eagerly and quickly) Maybe yes, maybe no. Your greatest grace will be that of not getting off message like I did. Promise me that when the time comes for you to begin your mission you will make it perfectly clear that the sins of selfishness not the sins of sex most infuriate God.

Jesus: (embracing John) I promise.

Narrator: They reached no agreement as to whether or not Jesus should be baptized. But Jesus did keep his promise to John in his inaugural sermon (Luke 4: 16-21) and in his last parable (Matthew 25:31-46).

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Day Four: Baptism delayed

Narrator: The next day Jesus is in the baptism line, trying to look solemn but is clearly uncertain about being there. J.B. is upset when he sees him there. By the time Jesus is the next one to be baptized John is nervous and irritated.

J.B.: (quietly but firmly) Why are you in line? What gives? My baptism is a baptism of repentance. What sins do you have to repent?

Jesus: (solemn and pontifical, uttering the first sentence attributed to him in the Gospels) “Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

J.B.: (losing his cool): What the hell does that mean?

Jesus: (with a gotcha laugh): Watch your language JB or the Jordan might carry you off to the Dead Sea.

J.B.: (still nervous as all get-out): The Jordan may carry me off if I do baptize you in it. I don't want to do anything rash. Why don't we talk about it this evening?

Narrator: That evening, in the light of the moon and their campfire, John and Jesus are trying to sort out their differences.

Jesus: (Somewhat grim, clearly upset): For years I have been saying ‘when my time comes’. My brother James has been telling me that I am like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. He’s right. I’m thirty years old and have nothing to show for it. (In those days thirty was really old as the life span was not what it is today).

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On my last birthday James lit into me: You're too smug about your faith! Faith without works is dead. If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and you say to them, God bless you, go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill, and yet do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?

J.B.: (feeling sorry for Jesus): You know James loves to pontificate. Don't let him push you into any rash decision. Talk to your mother about this. She's always kept her feet on the ground, even after your father died.

Jesus: (getting more agitated): That's just it. Mom sent me to you. When I saw you baptizing something moved me to get in line. But I was nervous and uncertain. That's why I gave you that silly answer to an honest question. Sorry, John.

J.B.: (topping off Jesus' wine cup, though he himself did not touch the stuff): What do you want to do with your life? You are uniquely graced. I can see that with my eyes closed.

Jesus: (hesitantly but with conviction): I like what you are doing. But you are much too hasty to cut and burn. I don't care much for the axe you carry in your words. I don't want people to be afraid of God. You can't love what you fear, not even if it is God you fear.

J.B.: (wide-eyed and incredulous): You really think you can build the kingdom of God on earth without the fear of God? You must be out of your olive-picking mind!

Jesus: (surprisingly calm and centered, as if he had hit pay dirt): Let's sleep on it.

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Narrator: That evening J.B. had a dream: Everyone is in awe as J.B. baptizes the daughter of Herodias. She danced that night in camp – a delightful but discreet dance. Herod heard about it and was fit to be tied.

Then suddenly John is baptizing Jesus. The Jordan seemed to be laughing and crying at the same time. The heavens were opened and J.B. saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Jesus. And he heard a voice from heaven saying: “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” J.B. is in awe. But he is not surprised.

Day Five: The baptism

Narrator: After Jesus told John he had the same baptism dream John had, but without the Herodias baptism and dance, John was willing to baptize Jesus in the waters of Repentance for sins. In those days dreams were highly treasured, and rightly so.

Before being immersed Jesus confessed his sins: ill will towards the Temple priests, impatient with displays of piety, overly zealous and righteous about siding with the wretched, disdain for those who are quick to see miracles where there are no miracles, and proud of his determination not to whip people with words as John did.

John is startled as Jesus gives him a smile in confessing his sin of pride. But then he bows slightly as he immerses Jesus in the Jordan River.

When Jesus comes up from his immersion his first thought was of his Father in heaven as the loving father of the worst possible

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sinner who would ever live. At first he was shocked, even disturbed about a love that knows no bounds.

However, once on shore he fell on his knees and prayed: How mysterious are the ways of God, how inscrutable are his ways.

And that was the way it was the day Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by his cousin John.

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SCENE THREE: THE TEMPTATION

(The Desert)

Narrator: After being baptized Jesus dreamt about the wild stories he had heard while growing up. Some dreams were reassuring, others were disturbing.

In his first dream Jesus saw himself in the womb of his mother, happy as a clam in high tide. Then he was a new-born baby wrapped in the arms of his mother who was sitting by candlelight in a dark room with a dirt floor, in a house much like the one they lived in now. Animals were braying in the lower level of the house. His mother was saying to his father: *The candles seem to be as bright as stars and the bleating of the sheep sounds like angels singing.* Joseph laughed and then hugged her.

Then his dreams became nightmares fueled by stories of the cruelty of power. He heard the agonizing screams of mothers rising out of Bethlehem, as their babies were being slaughtered because of rumors about a Messiah being born. He heard the screams of his own mother as if Herod had succeeded in killing her newborn son.

One dream was especially disturbing because in it Satan came to him looking like the wrath of God. But in this most vivid dream Jesus caught a break:

Satan: (cocky and sarcastic) Hey Jesus! Your brother James told you that faith without works is dead. I know you can turn stones into bread. Well, start turning. You keep talking about identifying with the hungry. Well, identify with them! Feed them! Faith without works is dead. If you feed them they will

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come. They will listen. They will work with you in building the kingdom of God on earth. That's why you are here, isn't it?

Jesus: (bewildered, off-balance, and uttering the second sentence attributed to him in the Gospels) One doesn't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Narrator: Jesus knows this is a weak response, a cop-out. His brother James made that clear. Fortunately for Jesus, Satan is not as clever as they say.

Satan: (not realizing his first temptation had Jesus off balance) Hey, Jesus, jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. God's power will save you. Bow to my power and I will give you the world to rule as you see fit.

Jesus: (grateful for these temptations to power, temptations he can easily handle) Away with you Satan!

Narrator: And away Satan went. Then Angels came and gave him water to drink and bread to eat, bathed him, sang songs to him, and behaved as you would expect angels to behave in such a situation. But before Jesus woke up Satan cried out: "I'll be back!"

Whether Jesus ever gave into the temptation to miraculously feed the hungry will be discussed later.

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SCENE FOUR: THE MOTHER

(Cana and Nazareth)

PARDON THE INTERRUPTION

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us Jesus began his public ministry by being baptized with the baptism of repentance and by being tempted by Satan. John's Gospel tends to tell stories which put some shine on the power and glory of Jesus.

In chapter two John tells us that Jesus began his public life with the miracle at Cana (a story not told in the other Gospels) and the story of the cleansing of the Temple - and getting away with it.

In the other Gospels the cleansing of the Temple at the end of Jesus mission leads to his crucifixion, not to a glorious march through Galilee. From the get-go Jesus is an almighty presence in John's Gospel. Only John's Gospel tells the story about Jesus changing water into wine at the beginning of his ministry. The Temple cleansing and the Cana miracle of wine put plenty of shine on both the power and glory of Jesus as he begins his public ministry.

Since Matthew, Mark and Luke omit the miracle at Cana story it is likely more a tall tale. But it suits my story quite well because it highlights Jesus' reluctance to begin his public ministry – even after his baptism and his victory over temptation. The Cana story of Jesus' confrontation by his mother follows naturally from his struggles with the Baptist and with Satan.

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In Cana: A Motherly Shove:

Narrator: Jesus had no wife, no children, and no job he could call his own. He was thirty years old and still living at home. It was not the best of situations. There was bound to be some tension at home.

Jesus and his mother, guests at a wedding in Cana, are in a heated conversation, as is the custom between mothers and adult, unmarried sons living at home.

Jesus: (irritated, even aggressive) What concern is that to you and me that they ran out of wine? It's not my wedding. We're their guests not their caterers!

Mary: (one note higher on the agitation scale) They wouldn't be out of wine if you had not brought your friends. I'm sure they were not on the invitation list.
And I noticed that they were not shy about drinking their share of wine – maybe even a little more than their share.

Jesus (not knowing what to say, grasping at straws) My hour has not yet come.

Mary: (giving Jesus *the look*) What in God's name does that mean? Stop talking like a rabbi playing with riddles. You will do something about this or I'll know the reason why.

Narrator: Jesus walks away, muttering in low tones so that his mother cannot hear. As you may know, such heated interactions are part of the grace of intimacy. There is just no other way for love to mature.

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Mary: (to one of the servants, determined to teach Jesus a lesson he won't forget) Go to my son and tell him you will do whatever he tells you to do.

Servant: (a little tipsy and part of the reason for the wine running out) What's he gonna do, change water into wine?

Narrator: Mary gives him *the look*. He scoots. Meanwhile, the news is spreading wildly that the wine has run out. In those days this was more than an embarrassment. It was believed to be a curse on the blessing of the wedding. That's why Mary rudely surprised her son with her 'Do something' command.

Servant: (easily finding Jesus who is loudly lamenting to his guys) Your mother told me to do whatever you tell me to do about the wedding party running out of wine.

Narrator: Jesus' guys slip away one by one. They want no part of this scene. Guys are known to do this more often than not.

Jesus: (stalling for time) Mm, uhh, ahem, ah... for the time being just fill up those six thirty gallon jugs with water, the ones used for ritual cleansing. The Rabbi may officially decide that running out of wine has polluted the sacredness of the wedding celebration. There may be another ritual washing. He will need plenty of water.

Servant: (Thinking, *Who died and left this guy boss?* However, he was wise enough to keep this thought to himself.) I'll get some guys to help me.

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Jesus: (Still stalling for time) I just saw the rabbi leave the wedding— probably to consult with others about what to do. Take your time, no hurry.

Servant: (not at all happy about being in charge of lugging water for six thirty gallon jugs, but remembering ‘the look’ Mary gave him) Whatever you say, Jesus.

Jesus: (having retreated to a back room and still upset about what to do next) What a mess! Mom will be furious if I don’t get some wine for these people. I heard about the servant’s crack about turning water into wine. I know God can work miracles. Any idiot knows that. But why would God change water into wine just to save a wedding couple from a supposed curse? I don’t even believe there is such a curse. Such a belief is ridiculous. Worse yet, I’m still not ready to begin my mission.

Narrator: Jesus goes on and on like this for some time until he hears raucous laughter. He goes into the main room where the wine is flowing like water. He sees his mother rushing to embrace him.

Mary: (pleased and affectionate) I knew you went out for more wine when I did not see you for over an hour. I hope your guys pitched in with the cost.

Jesus: (confused but relieved) I don’t want to talk about it. I’m glad that everything worked out. I know that it meant a lot to you.

Narrator: Later that night, at prayer

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Jesus: What was that all about? Was that a kick in the pants or what? Is it time for me to go public?

God: (pondering mightily): Should I see to it that Jesus finds out that his pious rabbi saved the day with the best wine from his cellar? If I do Jesus may never leave home. It's best to do nothing. Let's see what he does with this.

Narrator: God did nothing. The rest as they say is history. Or to put it in biblical terms, the rest is the stuff stories are made of, stories that promote faith, hope and love.

At Nazareth: Motherly advice

A week after the Cana wedding Mary and Jesus were celebrating his decision to begin his kingdom mission. It was just the two of them. Joseph had died and his brothers and sisters were long gone from the family nest. The mood was intimate, much different than that at the wedding. The meal was simple: two loaves of barley bread, one filled with cheese and the other with olives, some dried figs, and wine sent by the newly-weds from Cana. Both avoided talking about the wine incident at the wedding.

Mary had no 'fatted calf' to serve. This did not bother Jesus. But he was bothered, and she knew why.

Mary: (Quietly and carefully) I know you were able to come to the Cana wedding because you left John right before the storm troopers grabbed him. You did the right thing, son. I know you are not a coward. John knew it. You should know it. Don't fret about it.

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Jesus: (somewhat embarrassed) Mom, don't...

Mary: (suddenly reminiscing, as mothers tend to do) I was never happier than when I carried you in my womb. With you in me I felt that my soul magnified the Lord, blessed be his holy name. I was never more devastated than when we lost you after your bar mitzvah. When you were lost I could not even bring myself to bless the Lord.

Jesus: (very embarrassed) Mom, don't...

Mary: (nothing could stop her now) I remember how thrilled you were at your first visit to the Temple. You were beside yourself when the trumpet sounded the opening of the Temple gate. You gawked at the high walls and immense columns. You loved the candles, the sacred vessels, the multicolored and embroidered curtains, incense burning on the golden altar, the zither, the harp, and the temple singers. You ran up and down the nineteen steps leading into the inner courts laughing and shouting, *I'm a Jew, I'm a Jew, thank God almighty I'm a Jew.*

And then, as we left the Temple, you saw it in the light of the poor cripples begging on the steps. All your joy was drowned in your tears. Even as a child you would allow no one to neglect or belittle the poor. Even then I called you "My little messiah."

Jesus: (suddenly aware that his mother was preparing him for his mission) May your nickname for me in some way become my way of magnifying the Lord.

Mary: (hardly able to believe her great expectations for Jesus) Hold onto that spirit. Let it be your daily hymn to God, the Father of us all. Remember this, above all. Sickness is not a

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punishment for sin. If it were it would be wrong to heal the sick. I taught you some healing powers. Use them to make life easier for those weighed down with bodies that give them more sorrow than joy.

Jesus: (knowing that this was his mother's way of letting go of him) Mom, I...

Mary: (somewhat reluctantly) I must warn you. Making life easier for sinners is not easy to do. I was once seen as a sinner by some in our village. I was pregnant with you before your father and I were properly engaged. God blessed my pregnancy. The law did not. Your father and I learned to live with this. Now that you are going public some will hold your conception against you.

(Long pause, both hearts are pounding) Be careful out there. You and I could have been stoned to death if it had not been for your father. He saved our lives. The adultery law, meant to protect the holiness of marriage, can sometimes do more harm than good.

Son, I beg of you, don't ever go by the letter of the law.

Jesus: Mom, have no....

Mary: (There was no stopping her now that she was in her motherly advice mode) And another thing. Pick some guys who know how to handle themselves in rough situations when you are on the road. You won't be sorry. (Long pause)

Let me tell you about guys when in a group. They like to sit around a fire drinking wine and saying, "It doesn't get any

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better than this." But it's not long before they are moaning, "It doesn't get any worse than this." So choose at least one guy that you and they can tease. Having a guy the guys can kid around with helps to ease the tensions.

And have at least one guy who knows how to handle money. That requires also some guys who are able to bring in money for him to handle. Money is not easy to come by. So have some guys who can at least provide you with food. I would start with a couple of fishermen.

Jesus: (finally getting in a word, and quite pleased with the words he will be getting in) I already have a couple of fishermen in mind. And one of them is easily teased. That takes care of two of your concerns right there. I'm thinking of putting him in charge. I'm going to call him 'Rocky' even though he is anything but solid as a rock. I think the guys will enjoy the joke.

Mary: (now with the teasing look) By the way, take some women with you. They know more about cooking and washing clothes than men do. But don't let the guys treat them like maids, or worse yet, like their mothers. Let the women have their say about God and Caesar when discussions are held around the camp fire. I know that may be a problem. But you can handle it. I loved how you did not shy from carrying water from the well, a girl's job, and yet the boys did not dare call you a sissy.

Jesus: (verging on the sin of pride) I already have a few women in mind, mom. Mary of Magdala is one of them despite what gossips say about her.

Mary: (with tears of joy) My beloved son! Sometimes I think you were born old. Other times I think you will always be a

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child. You are the sweet mystery of my life. I love you so much it pierces my heart. My son, my son, my beloved son!

Jesus: (from the bottom of his heart) No greater praise will be given me than that of you calling me your son. Mom, being your son... (He breaks down, sobbing tears of joy and sorrow).

Mary: (trying to ease the tension): I made a seamless robe for you. I don't want you to be roaming the country looking like a bum. I want you to look decent. I know your cousin John has your ear and your heart. But don't dress like John. He looks like a wild man. Come here! Give me a hug and a kiss.

Narrator: They hugged and kissed. Only Mary and Jesus know the things they held in their hearts the day Jesus finally left home. That was a mother-son moment if there ever was one. In that moment Mary loved Jesus as her son, nothing less, nothing more. In that moment Jesus knew why it took him so long to leave his mother. There was no shame in it at all, none whatsoever. He was living with a mother who was full of grace.

A passionate and humorous story of Jesus sent by a Father who is not the architect and CEO of hell. If there is no hell, then what was the mission of Jesus? For the answer, read this book.

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