

Luke 3:15-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19 But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20 added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven,

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

OUR TRUE IDENTITY

Remember who you are.

Have you heard those words before? When I was a teenager headed out on a date or going on trip sometimes my parents would say something like that.

What they meant was:

Remember what we have taught you about right and wrong. Remember that your family loves you. Remember who you are ... and act accordingly.

Somewhere along the line we have muddied the water when it comes to our Christian identity. We have forgotten who we are. We have allowed ourselves to be defined by the world instead of by the word of God as revealed in Jesus.

Contrary to popular belief we are not defined by the clothes we wear or the car we drive. We are not defined by how we look, how much money we have or who we know.

God defines us. God tells us who we are and why we are here. And it is only in God that we find our true identity.

JOHN'S MESSAGE

Our lesson for today begins with John the Baptist. John was an impressive figure. We find his dress and preaching style to be unusual. But, to the people of his day he looked and sounded like the prophets of old.

And John was popular. In Mark's gospel we learn that everyone in Jerusalem and Judea came to hear John preach. The people wondered if John might be the Messiah.

And yet John did not want that glory. He knew his role in the salvation story. John said, "Don't think too highly of me. I'm not the Messiah. In fact, I'm not even worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals.

But, the Messiah is coming. And as I have baptized you with water he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

What did John mean by that?

He meant that heaven was coming to earth. God would be with his people through the life of ministry of this Messiah who was coming soon. It was another way to talk about the incarnation.

The Word of God was going to become flesh and live among us. And in the coming of the Messiah we would not only learn who God is; we would also learn who we are as well.

BAPTISM

We find our identity in the coming of Jesus. And that new identity is symbolized by the sacrament of baptism. In baptism God tells us who we are. Who are you?

You are one who has been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In other words you are God's child.

When we answer the "who am I" question in this way it changes everything. All of the other things that define us in life, our job, our family, our friends, what we own, pale in comparison to our identity in Christ Jesus.

When all is said and done one thing remains. We are children of the heavenly king.

Scholars have wondered for a long time why Jesus was baptized.

If Jesus was without sin, then why was Jesus baptized. Baptism was a symbolic way of cleansing the sinner who wanted to get ready for the coming of God's kingdom. If that's true, then Jesus didn't need to be baptized.

I think that when Jesus, the sinless one was baptized, the meaning of baptism shifted.

In the baptism of Jesus we don't see the cleansing of a sinner but the birth of God's kingdom. We see the revelation of God's salvation.

Jesus was a part of this sinful world. Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are.

But, Jesus did not succumb to the temptations of this world.

Jesus did not allow the world to define him. Instead, Jesus was defined by the heavenly vision and the heavenly voice.

HIS BAPTISM AND OURS

In our lesson for today, after Jesus is baptized, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in “bodily form like a dove.”

And finally, there is a voice from heaven, which said, “You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.”

We know that Jesus had a sense that he was special. Even at the tender young age of 12 he told his parents that he needed to be about his heavenly Father’s business.

But, now that calling becomes clear. Jesus is baptized not only with water but also with a heavenly promise. He is God’s Son. He is the Beloved.

In this sense the baptism of Jesus is unique. But, there is a connection between his baptism and ours.

The Bible teaches us that through the redemptive ministry of Jesus we too are received into the family of faith. We too are God’s children.

Like Jesus we are defined by the voice from upon high. And that makes all the difference.

CHRISTENING

Sometimes people ask me if “christening” and baptism is the same thing. Actually “christening” is a part of the ceremony of baptism.

The connection was easier to see in the early church. In those days the parents did not name the child. The church, often in memory of some favorite saint, named the child.

That seems strange to us. We often want to name our children after family members. We want to retain the right to name our children. That’s okay.

But, the ancient practice having the church name a child teaches us an important lesson. God names us. God tells us who we are when we are baptized.

God calls us Christian. We are part of His family. We are his children.

I did an infant baptism a few weeks ago. When I meet with the Session and the parents before the baptism, I say to them, "During the ceremony I will ask, 'what is the child's name?'"

Don't think that I have forgotten the name. I ask that question to remind all of us that our true name is given to us by God.

In a sense it is always God who names us. God knows us by name. And God chooses us to be a part of a larger family.

We are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are, all of us a part of God's family."

WE BELONG TO GOD

One of our confessions begins with these words, "In life and in death we belong to God."

We belong to God, not to ourselves, not to somebody's idea of the good life, not to our job or even to our family. We belong to God.

Those words are like two big gracious arms giving me a much-needed hug.

All of us want to be a part of something important. How big is this? We belong to God. In life and in death we belong to God.

When we are born of the Spirit we are baptized. And when we die that baptismal promise goes with us.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God as revealed in Christ Jesus. In life and in death we belong to God.

ACTING THE PART

But, that promise has implications for how we live today.

Many years ago I watched a silly movie called "King Ralph." John Goodman played a rather loud, boisterous American who was found to be next in line for the throne of England.

So, they made him king.

He made a mess of things, of course, because he had no idea how a king should act. But, as he continued in his role of Monarch, he began to understand how important it was to "act the part."

He actually began to live up to his new name.

I think the same is true for us. When we realize that we are God's children, that we belong to God, it raises our expectations.

We begin to act the part.

Oh, we won't be perfect. We all still sin and fall short of God's glory and his high calling. We won't always live up to the name of Christian.

But, our bad behavior will trouble us precisely because we know that we were made for something better. Our Christian name will always cause us to ask the question,

"Is this the Christ-like thing to do?"

To put another way, the Christian message is not that we should try to act like we are somebody. The Christian message is simply,

"You already are somebody. You are God's children. You have been given a Christian name."

And that knowledge enables us to act differently, not out of fear of punishment, but out of gratitude and joy for the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus.

HEARING THE MUSIC

In Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, there is a memorable scene. The slave, Kunta Kinte drives his master to a ball at a big plantation.

The slave hears the music from inside the house, music from the white man's dance. He parks the buggy and settles down to wait for his master to come back.

But, as he waits he hears music also coming from the slaves' quarters.

It is different music, music with a different rhythm. Kunta Kinte is drawn to this music. He must go and find the people who are making this music.

Inside there is a man playing African music, the music he remembered hearing as a child, the music he had almost forgotten. Kunta Kinte finds that this man was from his section of Africa, and they talk of home and all the things of home.

That night after returning from the dance Kunta Kinte went home a changed man.

He lay on the dirt floor of his little cabin and wept, weeping in sadness for the things that he had almost forgotten, weeping in joy for the things that he had remembered.

The terrifying, degrading experience of slavery had almost obliterated the memory of who he was.

But, the music helped him remember.

It's so easy for us to forget who we are in the middle of life's struggles. But, sometimes we hear music that reminds us of our true home.

Sometimes the language of faith breaks through the forces that would enslave us. Sometimes we hear a voice from heaven say,

"This is my daughter. This is my Son.
I love you. You are mine, and you are destined for something greater."

That is the promise of baptism.

This is the great divine revelation that changes everything.

EPIPHANY

Our bulletin reminds us that this is the Christian season of Epiphany. This is the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

Now what in the world does that mean? Most of us don't even use that word any more, at least with a capital letter.

When you use that word with a small "e" it describes a moment of insight, an "aha moment."

But, when you use that word with a big "E" it describes something greater.

It describes the moment of Divine intervention. It describes the moment when heaven touches earth, when the divine becomes a part of the human, when that which was mysterious and hidden is suddenly revealed.

That's what happened with Jesus long ago after his baptism. But, what we often miss is that it is still happening. The first Epiphany long ago was the just the beginning.

The Divine is still touching our lives in new and unexpected ways.

Anne Lamott in her book, *Operating Instructions*, told of a family being interviewed on the TV news show, *60 Minutes*.

The family consisted of a religiously devout mother in her thirties, a somewhat older and painfully shy father, and their ten-year-old daughter who was wheel chair bound. The family made a pilgrimage each year to a place where healing was reputed to occur.

The interviewer, Ed Bradley was giving the family a hard time for being so gullible. At one point he asked the little girl, "When you pray, what do you pray for?"

She replied, "I pray that my father won't be so shy. It makes him terribly lonely."

That stopped Bradley for a moment, but then pressed ahead with his skeptical line of questioning. It was costing the family thousands of dollars a year to go to this place, and they still had no miracle.

Looking at her loving daughter the mother replied, "Oh Mr. Bradley you don't understand. We have our miracle."

Bradley assumed that the only miracle worth noting was the one that fit his definition. The little girl would get out of the chair and walk.

But, he missed other miracles, the miracle of a daughter's growing love, the miracle of a family held together in faith, the miracle of joy growing in soil that should not sustain it.

Many of us are like Bradley. We don't expect any miracles. We don't expect any Epiphany, any word from above that changes us forever.

We live in a world that has become blind and deaf to God's word.

But, God loves us too much to leave us alone. Every day is a day when heaven touches earth, and the voice of God calls us out of love. What we need is eyes to see and ears to hear.

God help us look up and see the glory. God help us hear the voice that comes from heaven this very day.

Amen.