

Beloved By God

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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

Now when all the people were baptized,
and when Jesus also had been baptized
and was praying, the heaven was opened,
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.”

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I.

When I sat down to write this sermon my intent was to talk about *one* thing. However, all the while it is my strong suspicion that we would end up talking about *another* thing. Which is fine, because while life often comes down to one thing or another, they are quite often the same. It is just a matter of us catching up to the realization.

Before we endeavor to catch up, though, I would like us to first go back. Not very far, just 6 days, and not for very long, just a few minutes. Much like Ash Wednesday, which we Protestants kind of just cruise by, the occasion known as Epiphany is one that usually slips past us every year somewhat unnoticed and, for the most part, unaddressed. The obvious reason for this is that the date of Epiphany is determined by counting 12 days after Christmas, January 6th, which sees it fall mid-week. The result, therefore, is that Epiphany is easy to miss.

II.

As is the case with all the major religious moments in the liturgical year, Epiphany is correctly understood as a “Feast Day,” and serves as something of a “last hurrah” with which to conclude the Advent Season. While folks in the middle ages surely appreciated *any* reason to feast rather than work, we modern revelers are pretty much partied out by the time the 12th day of Christmas rolls around; twelve drummers drumming notwithstanding. Nevertheless, the Feast of Epiphany is a significant moment in the life of the church and, moreover, an important consideration to the believer endeavoring to undertake a serious, intentional, and practiced spiritual journey. Epiphany is traditionally understood as a recognition of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi as related in Matthew 2:1–12. While Epiphany makes a nice bow with which to wrap-up the 12 Days of Christmastide it was almost certainly some weeks, if not months or even years, before the Magi caught up to the Christ Child. Which is an excellent reminder that it is okay if it takes us some time to catch up to Christ.

III.

Reduced down to its essence, Epiphany is really about *identity*. While the story of Jesus' birth is compelling, it becomes transformative for those with an understanding that this particular person was either born as, or born to be, not only the child of God, but God incarnated, or made flesh. In fact, one could correctly argue that the entire New Testament (undergirded by the Hebrew scriptures) is a narrative concerning the identity of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the world. Meaning, the fullest understanding of Jesus requires that we know, understand, and accept the truth of his divine identity.

Which explains all the struggle and consternation to understand that identity in the centuries which followed his death and resurrection as the early church grappled with several Christological "versions" of Jesus. Was he just a prophet, teacher, and healer, or was he more than that? If so, what is the nature, form, and extent of that identity?

IV.

As stated earlier, it takes time to catch up to Christ. In this particular respect, it took three centuries for the early church to come to a consensus that Jesus the Christ is "homoousios." From the Greek words *homo*, meaning same or identical, and *ousia*, meaning being or essence. Homoousios, then, denotes that Christ, as God the Son, is of the *same* substance as God the Father and not *derived* from God. The belief that Jesus was more than human but not quite fully divine is both an historical and a persistent heresy known as "Arianism" (named after Arius, an Alexandrian priest who taught that Jesus was a created being, and not co-equal with God the Father).

The term "Homoousios" was cleverly crafted at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD which was convened to resolve "the Arian controversy" as it was known. The end result of which was the Nicene Creed, part of our confessional history, which states:

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father."

V.

The question of Jesus' identity was not a matter reserved solely for the early church, however. While it is true that the Council of Nicaea, along with a number of other such meetings of the ecclesiastical minds which have taken place over the span of 2000 years, resulted in a well-established and widely accepted orthodoxy about the identity of Christ, the basis for these orthodox views always begins and ends scripture. While scripture is a constant, how each generation interprets and understands scripture is always subject to a small degree of revision and large degree of refinement. Which is what it means to be "The Church Reformed, Always Reforming." Within scripture there is range of understandings about the identity of Jesus as Savior, as well as the identity of God as Creator, and the identity of the Holy Spirit as Sustainer. Not to mention how these three relate to each other in, and function together as, the Trinity.

VI.

For example, while the Hebrew Scriptures clearly express an understanding that there is only one true God, that *one* God is referred to with a variety of names: Elohim, Yahweh, Adonai to cite just a few. Whereas we simply translate each of these with the same word ("God") the biblical writers choose these names to denote a slightly different emphasis, expression, or nuance as to God's identity. Adonai signifies God's authority and sovereignty over all creation. Yahweh emphasizes God's eternal, self-existent nature. Elohim is actually grammatically plural meaning "gods" or "godhood."

Similarly, in the New Testament we discover a number of Christological titles expressing a range of meanings as to the identity of Jesus; such as: Son of Mary, Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, Savior, King, Christ, Good Shepherd, Last Adam, Son of David, Lord, Son of Abraham, Messiah and Logos. By far my favorite name for God, though, is the one given to Moses when he says, "who shall I say has sent me when Pharaoh asks?": "I am who I am" (or, "I am being who I am being").

VII.

This morning I have invited us to wander down into the weeds as to the identity of Jesus and God so as to remind us that whatever our understanding of God, we arrive at it experientially. While we may certainly debate

theologically and consider philosophically as to the *essence* of God (and many have done through the centuries) all we really have to go on is (1) what is revealed to us in scripture, and (2) our experience of the *existence* of God in our lives. All this is to say, is that there is “wiggle room” when it comes to how each of us considers and decides upon the identity of the divine. It is not about being sloppy or imprecise but, rather, about the recognition that *any* understanding of divine identity is inevitably and inescapably incomplete and, more to the point, an admission that when we say “One True God” the word “one” doesn’t reference singularity, but a plurality that erases all distinction so as to form the One who encompasses all. God will be who God chooses to be; in every age, and for each person.

VIII.

As many of you may have already surmised, my strong suspicion was correct: we’ve ended up talking about *another* thing rather than the *one* thing which was my original intent. Which is fine because as I stated at the start, while life often comes down to one thing or another, they are quite often the same. Hopefully, these last few minutes will allow us the wherewithal and opportunity to, now, catch up to that realization.

Today’s scripture reading is Luke’s version of the Baptism of Jesus by John and asserts a bold moment of theophany; a visible display to human beings that expresses the presence and character of God. As such, the Baptismal narrative joins Epiphany, and the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection in revealing (you guessed it) Jesus’ *divine identity*. Just who *is* this baby lying in a manger, this person standing in the River Jordan, this person hanging on a cross? The passage provides its own answer: Jesus is “the Son, the Beloved; with whom God is well pleased.”

IX.

While this fits nicely into the framework of the Christological understandings already discussed, what interests *me* most is the audience which God is addressing. In looking at the Baptismal story across the four Gospels, we see the emergence of very distinct Christologies, or understandings of the identity of Jesus ranging from high to low. A “high Christology” emphasizes the divinity of Jesus, while a “low/lower Christology” emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. Though subtle, these distinctions are not without significance.

The Gospel of John maintains a “high Christology” throughout. There is no birth narrative whatsoever. Instead, the book opens by relating Jesus’ cosmic origins as the Logos or Word: “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*” As for the Baptism, John merely relates that it occurred, understanding it almost as a redundancy.

X.

In Matthew, we are told the heavens open, a dove descends and a voice says, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*” Clearly, the voice is speaking to those who are witnessing the Baptism and serves as something of a divine proclamation to the world about Jesus’ identity.

However, in Mark’s Gospel, and here in our passage from Luke, the voice from heaven (God, we assume) is speaking not to the *crowd*, but to Jesus *himself*, saying, “*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” This would be an example of a low, or lower, Christology; one that emphasizes Jesus’ humanity.

It should come as no surprise that I am more of a low Christology kind of person, pastor, and preacher. Mostly because, to me, a low Christology is far more interesting and much more relatable. While I cannot comprehend Jesus’ divinity, recognizing my own humanity in Jesus makes God clearer and nearer to me.

XI.

At this point in the sermon I would invite all of us to take a breather, and recover from the long, arduous climb we have just made to, first, scale this mountain so that, now, we may sit atop it. We have all worked hard to ascend this summit, so let’s allow ourselves a few moments to enjoy the view.

At the start of the sermon I made a fairly provocative but subtle statement which I kind of snuck past you by intention. I said, “this particular person (i.e. Jesus) was either born as, or born to be, not only the child of God, but God incarnated, or made flesh.” Understanding Jesus to be born *as* the Christ indicates a high Christology. Understanding Jesus as born *to be* the Christ indicates a low Christology. Meaning, for the writer of Luke the divine identity of Jesus was not fully formed upon his arrival. Luke’s version of his Baptism clearly reveals that Jesus had to *grow into* his divine identity.

XII.

One of the things which make Christianity so compelling, if we will allow it, is the opportunity to see ourselves in God, to see God in us, and to see us all as One in Christ. After 32 years of pastoral ministry there are a few things I can tell you with absolutely certainty. I call them the 3-2-1-Nothing. That ministry really boils down to *three* things: be grateful; take care of people; and, truly celebrate one's blessings (i.e. have fun). That there are only *two* prayers in life: thank you; and, to not get hit any harder the next time to learn the lesson we should have learned this time. That each *one* of us struggles to believe that we are a child of God and that in us God is well pleased. And, that there is *nothing* in this world that cannot be forgiven, fixed, or forgotten.

What a relief, then, to read Luke's account of Jesus's Baptism and to realize that Jesus needed the same kind of encouragement, support, and reassurance that I find all of us are seeking each and every day of our lives. That we may all come to know and believe that we, too, are beloved by God. Which, like the Feast of Epiphany, is a personal epiphany which is easy to miss. Amen.