

## **Beginning As Beloved**

**Acts 19:1-7      Luke 3:21-22**

Sermon series in the gospel of Luke this winter and spring (through Easter)... We won't cover everything, but the main events and teachings of Jesus, especially those that are unique to Luke. Luke begins his gospel by saying that he's going to write "a more orderly account," which is his way of saying that he is very intentional about telling the Jesus story. And, he reveals Jesus as being very intentional about his purpose and calling and activity.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus is on a mission. And therefore, by association, his followers are on a mission too. That is a central theme, and we'll pick that up as we go along. In Luke's gospel Jesus sends disciples on short term mission trips, and Jesus himself engages people on the margins and in the trenches. Luke's gospel is the only one that includes parables like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son and the parable of the great banquet where the host says, "Go into the highways and byways and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." It's in Luke's gospel, after his evening with Zacchaeus, where Jesus proclaims, "The son of man came to seek and to save the lost," which could be considered Jesus' personal mission statement, and the signature saying of Luke's gospel. Luke pays more attention to the lost, the least, the poor, and to the

women who followed Jesus, more than the other three gospels combined. Yet, despite these unique aspects of Luke's gospel, all of the gospels agree on this: when Jesus appears as an adult, the first thing he does (or has done to him) is consent to baptism.

As we begin a new year, every year, this is the traditional Sunday to reflect on Jesus' baptism, following the birth of Christ and Epiphany. This is a great way to start the new year, with the freshness of new birth, and now the reminder—through the baptism of our Lord Jesus—of our belovedness as God's children.

Luke tells us that people were flocking to John the Baptist to be baptized; and now Jesus joins them:

Luke 3:21-22

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

And so Jesus comes, and is baptized by John like everyone else. Ordinary Jesus. No conversation, no details, no fanfare. An ordinary event. But as he

comes out of the water, the extraordinary happens. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and a voice comes from heaven.

And the voice says *“You are my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* This is who Jesus is. Beloved son, with whom God the Father is well pleased. It was apparently important for him to hear, and know. And it was important that a large crowd hear and witness it.

Why did Jesus need to hear this? Why was it important? Before I dive into that, I want us to first be surprised that Jesus got baptized at all. In the other gospels John the Baptist indicates that Jesus should be the one baptizing John, not the recipient of baptism from him.

This is Jesus’ first adult act in all of the gospels. And this first deed of Jesus, the first act of our Lord, is not to **do** anything... but consent, and receive. This is very important. Jesus doesn’t come into his adult life and ministry busy with activity—with great fanfare, mighty deeds, or with teaching. The first thing Jesus does is consent to baptism; he goes down in the water with us. For us.

Jesus identifies with us, with our humanity, from start to finish, from birth to death. Jesus becomes completely one with us in our humanity, and identifies with us in our humanity. And that is why he submitted to baptism. He didn’t

*need* it. In a way, **we** needed him to do it, and it was an act of sheer grace on our behalf.

It was an act of love for Jesus to submit to baptism because it means that he is willing to go down with us and meet us in our humanness and identify with us—sinless though he was, sinful though we can be. Our frailty and messiness and humanity do not scare him off.

And the symbolism of the Holy Spirit resting on Jesus in the form of a **dove** is part of the significance of this identifying with lowly humanity. It isn't fire (symbolic fire) that descends on Jesus, like at Pentecost. It was something that looked like a dove.

Certainly the dove represents peace and that God is bringing salvation to humanity through Christ (as with Noah's ark... the dove returning with an olive branch was a symbol of peace and redemption as the flood receded); but for those who witnessed Jesus' baptism, the dove also represented poverty.

Remember, since we're right on the heels of Christmas, when Mary and Joseph dedicate Jesus in the temple, instead of paying the usual offering for this dedication, they had to avail themselves of the provision in the law that accommodated the poor, and offer... 2 doves. That would not have been lost on

the witnesses of the baptism, and the Holy Spirit resting on him in the form of a dove shows that Jesus would identify with humanity in our lowliness and poverty (materially and spiritually; “Blessed are the poor” Jesus would later say).

This is why Jesus was baptized.

Now, why these words from heaven: you are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased? I think this is the most significant part of the baptism.

These words.

They are spoken because it was important for Jesus to receive his identity, spoken out loud over him, before he did anything. Yes, he is God’s son come to us in human form. But as a human, he needs to hear the words of identity and affirmation spoken over him by his heavenly Father. And, **we** need to hear those words as well, and receive our identity from our heavenly Father.

It is so imperative that **we** know who we are. Do you know that God is pleased with you, right here and now? That you are God’s beloved son? God’s beloved daughter? That God delights in you right here and now?

For years, decades, the message we received has been: “Original sin! You’re a sinner.” That’s what we’ve been told is our identity, our baseline for existence. How has that worked for us??

This is why, in the Acts 19 passage (Luke wrote Acts, too, btw), there is an important shift from the baptism of John—which was a baptism of repentance—to baptism *in the name of Jesus*—a baptism of belovedness, where we affirm: you are my daughter/son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased. **That** is the baseline for our existence! Those words. That you, with Jesus, are a beloved child. That’s where we begin in our understanding of who we are. It doesn’t mean we don’t have areas in our life where we struggle, where the image of God in us might be distorted and we feel less than what we could be. It simply means that sin and struggle do not define us. That isn’t who we ARE. Who we are, our baseline understanding of who we are, is: beloved child of God.

Because... those words spoken over Jesus are also for us. That’s another part—a big part! —of the reason for Jesus’ baptism. His identification with us, but also *our* identification with *him* as beloved daughters and sons of God.

Of course, it was Jesus’ baptism and it was special because it was Jesus. But listen: we are God’s daughters, we are God’s sons, we are adopted, and therefore

we are brothers and sisters with Christ and co-heirs with Christ. As the apostle Paul says in a couple places, we have been baptized with him in his death, and raised with him to new life. So, take it on faith, these words are for you too. You are God's son, whom he loves; you are God's daughter, whom he loves; with you God is well-pleased. Take it on faith.

This is so important, I can't emphasize it enough: we can't start a spiritual journey on a negative foundation. If we just seek God out of fear or guilt or shame (which is often the legacy of we've called original sin), we won't go very far. If we start negative, we stay negative. We have to begin positive—by a wonderful experience, by something that's larger than life, by something that dips us into the depths of God's love, and of our own being. That's what the word baptism means, literally "to be dipped into." So, we must begin as beloved; or begin again as beloved. If we begin with "I'm a wretch, a sinner," then even the words of affirmation and identity can fall on deaf ears because the negativity of guilt, or shame, of God's apparent anger or displeasure, is difficult to get past.

This is why we revisit this passage every year at this time. To begin, or begin again, as beloved in the new year. To be dipped into the depths of love and life.

Jesus was dipped in this mystery of life and love. That's where it all begins—even for him! The unique Son of God had to hear it with his own ears, and then he couldn't be stopped! Then he has plenty to say and do for the next three years, because he found his own identity, and his own life's purpose.

So, we begin as beloved. Please take a few moments each day this week and rehearse this truth: I am God's son, I am God's daughter, God's beloved, with me God is well-pleased. I know this is so hard to believe. It takes work to believe it. We work hard at being good, or being better, or being self-made, or being... something. But I firmly believe that what we, and all people, need to work hard at, is being beloved. The rest will then take care of itself. If we can begin, and begin again on a positive foundation, positive results will follow.

Getting back to our account from Luke: it is critical for us to notice: ***Jesus had not done one thing before he heard these words***, except submit to baptism. He hadn't taught, he hadn't healed anyone, or called any disciples to follow him yet. So, this affirmation of Jesus came SIMPLY BECAUSE it pleased the Father to say it. And because it is the truth. Jesus' identity was not derived from what he did. He didn't receive it because the Father said, "Good job!" after feeding the 5,000— 'you are my beloved because you did such a great job.' You've earned it.

No, Jesus' identity came because the Father loved him. Period. **Then** he went and did stuff. A lot of good stuff. But his doing good flowed out of that relationship, and not because of the needs around him, or out of duty, or guilt, or wanting to earn God the Father's approval.

It's the same with you and me. God our Father loves us, not if we perform so many good deeds, or when we've earned it, or because we do something. We are just his children, and it gives our Father pleasure to say it to us, and mean it.

That's the beauty of child baptism. Words of blessing and covenant love are pronounced over that child before they are able to do anything or respond in faith. That's where they receive their identity. And it's our job as parents and fellow adult pilgrims in Christ's church to remind children as they grow, of who they are. God's beloved kids. To say to them, "You were baptized. Here is what God said about you. You are God's beloved son, God's beloved daughter; with you he is well pleased." Sometimes, as a parent, in certain moments, **we** may not be well-pleased with them; but we tell them, "I'm gonna stick with what **God** says about you" and act on that.

So, God's love and identity are pronounced over Jesus before he did anything. And it is pronounced over us before we do anything.

Therefore it follows that the motivation of Jesus' ministry from here on out was not the needs of the world. It wasn't the world's needs that motivated him, or drove him to action. It was the Father's love for him, and his love for the Father. Out of that relationship flowed their love for the world.

So Jesus' ministry was not based on the needs of the world, but on the love of God. Their mutual love—for one another, and then for the world. That's why Jesus' greatest commandment, first and foremost, is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind"—*then*, 'love your neighbor.' The first command isn't "Go help everybody's needs." "Get busy!" No; we need to love and be loved by God first, before we **do** anything.

So, therefore, like Jesus, *our* ministry is not based on the world's needs. It can't be and shouldn't be, especially for us limited humans. Because it's a bottomless pit of need out there. It's endless. If our ministry, our action, is driven primarily by the world's needs then what we will end up doing is saying yes to more and more things because, well, the need is great and we're good people and we have resources. But when we do that, what we create is a bunch of tired and burnt-out church folks. Because there is always more need—it's a bottomless pit.

Our lives and our ministry are based on the Father's love for us, and our love for the Father. And out of that flows our mutual love for the world. We need to hear the heavenly voice first. Find our identity in what God says about us. This is what brings life, and energy, and hope. And then we can hear his voice more clearly to do only the things God calls us to do; and not be overwhelmed by everything that could be done. Or what we think *should* be done.

The first and most important question you and I can ask in prayer is not "What do you want me to do?" but "Who am I in your sight?" Ask that question first, and then be quiet and let God speak words of affirmation and identity over you, the way they were spoken over Jesus.

Was given a tour at an Episcopal church in Seattle that had remodeled their sanctuary. At the entrance to their sanctuary, there was a small pool, about the size of a kiddie pool, knee high, beautifully adorned with tile, and adjacent to it was a bowl at waist level. This was just inside the doors of the sanctuary. This is their baptismal font. As people enter for worship, they dip their hand in the water—to remind them of baptism, and to remind them of their identity, to remind them of forgiveness and grace. That they have passed through the waters of salvation, like the people of Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea.

To remind them to listen for God's voice of redemption during the worship service as a beloved daughter or son of God.

And then, as people leave they once again dip their hand in the water to remind them that as God's beloved children they now go out into the world with God's love to become people who serve as Jesus served—not anxiously trying to fix all the problems out there, but to go forth with peace and blessing and joy, doing their part.

Galatians 3:26-28:

<sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

We're going to sing this passage now...