

Who Do You Think You Are?

This morning's Gospel returns us to the banks of the Jordan River, picking up where we left off just four weeks ago with the baptism of Jesus. Luke's description of Jesus's baptism is the briefest of any in the Gospels, but he hits the most crucial point. After Jesus is baptized, the Father proudly announces that Jesus is his Son, the Beloved, with whom he is well pleased. To drive the point home, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in a bodily form like a dove. It's an amazing spectacle, and I have to wonder – did anybody there even notice?

One question that drives me a little crazy throughout the Gospels is why people seemed to have so much trouble recognizing Jesus for who he was. Maybe they just missed the moment. Luke tells us that the dove descended and the Father spoke only after all the people who came to John that day had been baptized. Maybe Jesus waited until everyone else had been baptized to come forward – it would have been in character – and the crowd had dispersed by then. We know the Baptist saw the dove because he says so in John's Gospel, but maybe no one else did because they had all gone home. Or maybe, as Mark and Matthew suggest, only Jesus saw the Holy Spirit and heard the Father's voice. That might explain why people who were so desperate for deliverance that they seriously questioned whether John, a hermit who might fairly be called a bit eccentric, might be the Messiah, but failed to notice the young man who came to be baptized last, even after a sacred bird swooped in out of nowhere to perch lovingly on his shoulder.

Bible scholars like to debate a different question. During his human lifetime, how much did Jesus know about who he was and why he came to earth? And if he wasn't fully aware from birth, when did he figure it out? Mark and Matthew treat the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the words of the Father as a revelation to Jesus, the "ah, ha!" moment that launches his ministry. That doesn't work as well with Luke's Gospel because Luke gives us so much information about

the Nativity. It's hard to believe that Mary and Joseph wouldn't have told Jesus about the extraordinary circumstances of his birth – archangels and wise men from the East don't drop in every day. Jesus must have known something about his divine heritage, especially given that Luke tells us that, as a boy, Jesus abandoned his parents during their annual visit to Jerusalem so he could hang out with the priests in the Temple, which he called his Father's house. Having grown up knowing himself to be the Son of God, he wouldn't have been likely to forget it. So, I think we can safely imagine that Jesus already knew who he was when he went to John for baptism, and that the Father's words were to confirm his identity not for his sake, but for ours.

The better question, however, might be not whether Jesus knew himself to be God's Son, but what he understood that to mean. As the Reverend James Ligett points out in his sermon, "To Be the Beloved," Jesus wasn't a holy hand puppet. The Father confirmed who Jesus was, but didn't tell him what to do. No one did. Jesus had to decide for himself and, just like us, he had to do it in the complicated context of societal expectations. People had all kinds of ideas about who the Messiah should be: a wise prophet, a mighty warrior, a miracle worker, a priestly king. Jesus was all of those things, and more. He chose as his model the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecies, the gentle healer whose self-sacrifice redeems not only a particular group of people in a particular time and place, but all of humanity for all time. For Jesus, being the Beloved meant embodying and expressing God's love in the most powerful possible way.

Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism knowing exactly who he is – the beloved Son of the most high God. It takes everyone else longer than it should to recognize him. Throughout his ministry, Jesus is repeatedly challenged, mostly by people in power who demand to know "by whose authority" he preaches, teaches, feeds crowds of thousands, heals on the Sabbath, and does whatever else needs doing without asking anyone's permission first. If folks had been

paying attention at the Jordan River or, for that matter, at any of many pivotal moments in Jesus's ministry, they would have known exactly who authorized him to do those things. Then as now, though, truth comes hard to those who don't want to accept it. And while we don't use the phrase "by whose authority" much anymore, there's a comparable question that *does* get used, more often than I'd frankly prefer: "who do you think you are?"

Perhaps you were fortunate to grow up never hearing that question but, for many of us, "who do you think you are?" was what parents, teachers, and other authority figures asked when they wanted to take kids down a peg or two lest they get too big for their britches. Unfortunately, that question comes loaded with a condescending subtext – maybe you think you're something special, young man or young lady, but you're *not*. It would take a very brave child to answer at all, much less to reply with something like, "I think I'm somebody who's going to make the world a better place when I grow up." And that's too bad because, while only one little boy grew up to save the world, there's plenty of opportunity for every child to make some portion of it better over the course of their lives.

As we celebrate the Baptismal Feast of our Lord this Sunday, the church invites us to contemplate the meaning of our own baptism. That can be challenging because baptism encompasses so much. We can't equate our baptism with the baptism of Christ, the only "Son with a capital S" of our Creator. We can't claim to be "the Beloved with a capital B." But we *are* beloved children of God, so beloved that, as our Catechism tells us, "the divine Son became human so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God, and be made heirs of God's kingdom." We are so beloved that God invites us to baptism, "the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God." In baptism, we receive the "inward and spiritual grace [of] union with

Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.” One need only be baptized once to receive its blessings, but baptism is not some kind of “one-and-done” magic trick to save us from the fires of hell. Baptism is the beginning of a loving relationship with our God that grows deeper and richer throughout our lives and beyond. Baptism makes us members of Jesus’s family. What more could we possibly want to be?

It can be difficult to understand our place in a family where our big brother is both fully human and fully divine. John’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’s divinity, which is sacred, vitally important, and more than a little intimidating. Even Jesus’s closest friends were scared half to death when he allowed them to see him fully transfigured. Luke’s Gospel, by contrast, emphasizes the human Jesus to whom we can more comfortably relate. It’s significant, I think, that Luke so often shows us Jesus praying, as he does immediately after his baptism. That tells me that we are also invited to converse with God in prayer, not only in church but wherever we are and whatever is happening in our lives. God wants to hear from his children, and I believe he loves it when we sit down to talk through whatever’s on our minds, especially if we also remember to ask about whatever might be on his. It’s not our job to save the world – Jesus already took care of that. But there are still a lot of things that we, our Father’s beloved children, can do and be to make it better. If we listen, God just might tell us what those things are.

Scripture tells us who Jesus is – it also tells us who we are. For all our faults and failings, we are the beloved children of the most high God, adopted into the heavenly family through the holy sacrament of baptism. So, should somebody ask you, “who do you think you are,” you know just what to tell them. Just say you’re the beloved child of God. And remember, it’s more fun if you wink when you say it. Go for it, friends. Amen.