



First Sunday of Epiphany
Light of Christ Anglican Church
The Rev. Mike Moffitt
January 9, 2022

Christ Came to Identify With Us

Text: [Luke 3:15–22](#)

Today begins the 2nd week of Epiphany which means “manifestation” where early church celebrations honored any of the four manifestations of Christ:

his birth

the worship and adoration of the Magi

Jesus’ baptism

the first miracle at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine

Epiphany considers how the four manifestations reveal God to mankind. At his birth, the angels bore witness, and the shepherds, representing Israel, bowed down before Jesus. The visit of the Magi, or Wise Men revealed Jesus to Gentiles. At his baptism, the Holy Spirit descended, and God the Father declared Jesus’ as His beloved Son in whom He was well pleased. And the first miracle at the Wedding in Cana revealed Jesus’ divinity over nature. God disclosed himself to humankind through the person of Jesus. He made himself known so that we might know him. Today we will consider the Baptism of Jesus and the invitation that it reveals to us.

I wanted to start by sharing a parable written by nineteenth-century Danish theologian, philosopher, and religious author, Soren Kierkegaard. It's entitled "The King and the Maiden"

Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden.

The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden.

How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know?

If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross over the gulf between them.

"For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal," concluded Kierkegaard. The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend. He clothed himself as a beggar and approached her

cottage incognito, with a worn cloak fluttering loosely about him. It was no mere disguise, but a new identity he took on. He renounced the throne to win her hand.

Of course, we can't draw a strict parallel between this parable and what Jesus did in His incarnation, but it is clear that what Kierkegaard expressed in parable form, reminds us of what the apostle Paul wrote concerning Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:6–8,

...though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Throughout the Old Testament God often condescended to come to men in ways they could understand, and live through. He came and spoke with Abraham, Moses, to the nation of Israel, the prophets and many others. Throughout the word of God there are examples of God being the initiator in the relationships that He has with those He created. So, with that in mind let's consider our gospel passage from [Luke 3:15–22](#).

I mentioned last week that there had been four hundred years of silence between the end of the prophetic word and the time of Jesus. Then God did the unthinkable and took on flesh and came to us as a newborn baby and lived among those whom He had created. That God would condescend to such a degree was unimaginable. Like the king in Kierkegaard's parable, God displayed His love for those who had turned away from Him in order to provide them a way back into fellowship with Him. It is a story unlike any other and points us to a love that is unparalleled anywhere else in human history.

As we look at our gospel reading this morning Luke draws a contrast between those who are coming to John the Baptist to receive a baptism of repentance for their sins, and Jesus who is also coming to be baptized but for an entirely different reason.

Let's read again our gospel from Luke 3:15–16 and 21–22 but our main focus will be on 21–22.

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the messiah. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water but one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was being baptized too, and as he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice from Heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

I believe that it is important to note that Jesus was 30 years old when he came to be baptized by John. There isn't anything written about his early childhood until he was 12 years old and went with his parents to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. You likely remember that during this story his parents left Jerusalem heading back home thinking he was with family or friends, and they traveled for a day before realizing that he wasn't with them. They went back and found him in the temple courts talking with the teachers amazing them with his understanding of the word of God. When his parents questioned him as to why he had stayed behind his answer was: *"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"* I bring this up to point out that Jesus knew who he was, if even partially, at 12 years old.

So now we come to today's passage, and Jesus is prepared to begin the mission that the Father sent him to accomplish. Eighteen years have passed since anything else is known about His life except that during this time Jesus was a carpenter in Nazareth. Apparently he didn't make it known that He was the Son of God and all we know is *"and Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."* John the Baptist and Jesus were relatives and yet [John 1:32](#) indicates that John didn't know that Jesus was the *"Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world"* until the Holy Spirit revealed it to him.

John the Baptist was moved by God to go out into the wilderness to preach a baptism of repentance and the people flocked out to him to be baptized. This probably indicates that they were hungry for God and they had been looking for the Messiah to bring relief from the oppression of Rome to whom they were subservient. The authority and power which the Baptist demonstrated in calling them to repentance gave them hope that perhaps this was the Messiah, and an indication that finally, God remembered His promises to Israel. However, John was quick to let them know he not only wasn't who they were looking for but instead he points to the superior greatness of the one to come. To direct others to Jesus is the call of God's servant.

Darrell Bock in his Commentary on Luke writes¹,

So great is the One to come that a prophet of God is not worthy to untie his sandals. This illustration carries great power. Among the many tasks that a first-century slave performed for his master, one of the most demanding and least liked was removing sandals from the master's feet. John

¹ Darrell Bock, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, IVP, A Promise of the One to Come and Other Warnings (3:15-20) - IVP New Testament Commentary Series - Bible Gateway

reverses the image to highlight the gulf between human beings, even great persons, and the One to come. It is not that untying sandals is too demeaning for the prophet; it is that he is not worthy to be that close to the Messiah. This is like a CEO saying he is not worthy to take out Jesus' garbage.

Actually, the rabbis of Jesus' day taught that a teacher might require just about anything of his followers except to have them take off his sandals. That was considered too humiliating to demand. Yet John said that he was not even worthy to do this for Jesus.

The primary purpose for which John the Baptist was sent was to wake up the spiritually dead, calling them to repentance. I suspect that those who were coming out to be baptized by John felt themselves faithful to Torah and safe in their heritage as the children of God. The problem was that they were steeped in their religious traditions but didn't realize that God had departed the temple hundreds of years before. Those who have encountered the living God know when His presence is lacking, and they will seek Him diligently through prayer and praise. But if someone has never come to saving faith and known the indwelling presence of God, then they won't even know what they are missing. That was true in the time of the coming of Jesus and I suspect that this is true for many within the organized church today.

One of the first and most important parts of declaring the word of God is that it makes a man or woman start to think about their position before a holy God. Unless they hear the truth of their condition they will never realize their thoughtlessness of the things of God. The truth of Christ will not be known unless someone speaks to make Him known.

John the Baptist was being the faithful herald that he was sent to be, and he was careful to accept no glory for himself. Instead, he pointed those who came to him to the only one who could provide them with what they needed. John was introducing the one who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This very small section of Scripture tells us a great deal that we need to know. There is an essential difference between Jesus Christ and even the most holy and righteous servants of God. Only Jesus has the power to change hearts and transform lives and only through Jesus can we be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John was calling sinners to a baptism of repentance through water signifying cleansing, but the Messiah was coming with a different baptism. The Holy Spirit's outpouring was promised as part of the New Covenant. Those who are in Christ are promised an immersion, an overflowing of the Holy Spirit in our lives that will enable us to be reconciled to God and live our lives with Him. The Spirit calls us to a deeper relationship with God that can't be known apart from a relationship with the Messiah.

The Apostle John would later recall Jesus' promise to His disciples in John 16:13–15,

“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

But John the Baptist is also pointing to another function of the one who was coming. The Messiah would both purify those who come to Him

and destroy those who reject His offer, like fire burns up the worthless chaff. God's power is always a transforming power, a purifying power. This baptism is not referring to water baptism but pictures the Spirit's coming to gather a people to himself. It refers to the promise of the Spirit's coming to those who trust in Jesus, while excluding those who do not respond to him. In the Bible fire is a key image for purging and judgment. Last month we considered the "refiners fire and the fullers soap" of [Malachi 3:2-4](#). We saw that it is sin that separates us from God so if we would turn from our sins and follow the Lord Jesus, we must be prepared for the refiners fire and the fullers soap.

Another key Old Testament passage mentioning Spirit and fire together is Isaiah 4:4-5, where people are purged so some may dwell in God's presence,

when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy.

This is a metaphor for judgment that consumes the rebellious and purifies the faithful. It points us to the final stages in the work of Christ, especially in the New Heavens and the New Earth where everything is renewed.

So, the Holy Spirit and fire represent two integral aspects of Jesus' ministry. He comes to gather and to divide. The offer of the Spirit must be received. Those who respond are purged and taken in, while those who reject are tossed away like chaff, as verse 17 suggests. Jesus is far superior to John because, in the end, it is Jesus alone who matters for any person.

John is preparing those who came to him to turn to the Messiah who will be the one to divide the true from the false, to separate the wheat from the chaff; *“the winnowing fork is in His hand.”*

Let’s now briefly consider the baptism of Jesus. For Him, this was his call to action. It’s important that we understand that the first thing he did was to identify himself with this movement of people in their search for God. He knew what was coming and yet remained faithful to that calling. He had waited for the Father to speak but now his time had come. For 30 years God in the flesh had dwelt among men dealing with the same issues that we deal with and yet knowing that the time would come when he would go to the cross.

Here is where Luke draws the contrast: when Jesus steps down into the water to be baptized by John, Luke records that he is praying and I think that this is so important for us to pick up on. Luke is the only one to mention this, but I believe that he wanted us to understand that the Spirit descended after Jesus prayed, probably a prayer to the Father acknowledging that he was willing to be obedient. The result was that Heaven was opened up, the Holy Spirit descended down upon Him in the form of a dove and a voice, the voice of the Father said, *“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

Jesus’ baptism is not like our baptism in that He had no reason to repent of sin. His baptism was identifying with the people of Israel in a way that no one else could. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, had grown in the Holy Spirit, and now was anointed by the Holy Spirit that He might be able to complete the task before Him. We see in this event that all three persons of the Trinity are present and those there heard the voice from Heaven declaring the Father's delight in the Son. What the voice of God had to say

about Jesus was in stark contrast to what John had to say about the misguided sons of Abraham as they came to him for baptism.

Luke 3:7–9:

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Jesus came because men and women have no hope apart from his coming to their rescue. His participation in John’s baptism reveals his readiness to be the only solution that will appease the wrath of God against sinful man. This begins the fulfillment of what the prophets had foretold and John had been preaching. The answer to man’s alienation from God and the opportunity to be forgiven of sin and restored to a relationship with God had come in the person of His Son. John baptizes with water to picture cleansing, but Jesus brings the power of the Holy Spirit to wash away sin and to bring the presence of God into people’s lives.

For this willingness Jesus is proclaimed to be the *“beloved Son; with whom I am well pleased.”*

Jesus, unlike the rest, is acceptable to God and unlike the sons of Adam is in a distinctive sense the perfect Son of God. The Father was revealing that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 42:1 that we read this morning.

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.”

Therefore in His baptism Jesus acknowledged that he was prepared to go through with all that the Father had asked of Him as the servant of the Lord of Isaiah 42. He knew that it would culminate in His role as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Jesus the Messiah, God’s anointed King, knew that His life would involve suffering and the cross before there would be power and glory restored.

So what should be our takeaway from this word? I think we can see the answer in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 42:1–9. Let’s look again at verses 6–9,

“I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

The coming of the Servant Jesus established a New covenant, an everlasting one that offered cleansing from sin by the blood of Christ so that men and women can know God. This new covenant community as the recipients of God’s light would be light bearers shining the light of Christ into a world in darkness. God assures us that He is the Lord and there is no other. There is no reason to look elsewhere, but instead realize that through the sacrifice of Jesus all things are made new. But also, to return to the old ways is to reject the offer of salvation.

Everything in this story encourages us to turn our focus on walking with the Lord in covenant faithfulness as those who shine the light of Christ. Let me close with an exhortation from the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:4–6

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

Let us be found faithful to that calling.

Let's pray.

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