

**"Beloved"**  
**(Luke 3:15-17, 21-22)**  
**January 9, 2022**

John the Baptist had the attention of the people. They were all filled with expectation, wanted to make sure if he was the Messiah. John's reply was unambiguous. He said he was not. He told them they must wait for another one who would satisfy their expectation. He and his work would become insignificant compared to the One who would come. In particular, John pointed to his importance to the people, the baptism he was doing for them, and the power they thought he possessed.

The above was the portrait of John presented by Luke. Did it represent John's self-understanding? How did John understand the role of the Messiah? Did he deny that he was the Messiah because his understanding was different from that of the people? Or did the denial reflect the common consensus of the first Christians rather than John's after seeing the events that happened to John and Jesus? This question might sound unnecessary. However, if we take the ethnoreligious group Mandaean seriously, we might need to reconsider the importance of the question before abandoning it. According to The Scroll of Great Revelation, which recounts the history of the Mandaeans, they were disciples of John the Baptist. They fled Jerusalem before its fall in 70 CE. They went first to modern-day Turkey, then Iran, and finally settled in Iraq. Now approximately 60,000 to 70,000 Mandaeans worldwide still recognize John the Baptist as their most excellent and final prophet, while Jesus was just a false Messiah.

The Gospel of Luke took a very different position from the Mandaeans. The writer put Jesus in a much higher place than John. Jesus was recognized as the

One to replace John. "Herod ... locked John up in prison." (Luke 3:20) Luke mentioned John's imprisonment before Jesus, and the people were baptized. So, did John do the baptism for Jesus? Even though Luke didn't deny that John baptized Jesus as what the other gospels described, the way how he posed the event of baptism showed clearly that John was no longer important.

So, do you think John saw the opened heaven and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove? Luke didn't clarify. John might not even be there. Anyways, the voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased." "You are my son." The voice addressed Jesus directly.

Do you think the father-son relationship between God and Jesus started at the baptism? When Jesus was twelve, he said to Mary and Joseph, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2: 49) With "Father's house," Jesus was referring to the Temple. The awareness of this Father-son relationship started early in Jesus' life. And as Jesus matured, this relationship became even more vital. Consequently, we shouldn't be surprised when Jesus cleansed the Temple and quoted, "My house shall be a house of prayer," but you have made it a den of robbers.

Today is the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. The text of Luke shows us that the meaning of Jesus's baptism differed from how John understood it. John understood his baptism with water as an act of repentance, symbolizing the willingness of life-changing that would lead to forgiveness of sins, and hence away from God's judgment. But the importance of baptism has nothing to do with water, stagnant or running, impure or pure, springling or fully submerging. Instead, Luke summarized its significance under the following circumstances: 1)

When Jesus was praying; 2) When the heaven was opened; 3) When the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form; 4) When God's love was expressed.

What do we do when we pray? We speak to God, of course. We can do it alone or in groups; through a ritual, e.g., lighting a candle, kneeling on our knees; with our voice, e.g., hymn singing, chanting, speaking; or through a liturgy, e.g., using the Lord's Prayer, or various forms of prayer exercise. Why did Jesus pray? He clearly stated (Matt 6:5-8) that he didn't want it to be done like the hypocrites did, i.e., saying without following up. He also didn't want it to be like a theatrical production, i.e., a sounding board of some fancy ideas. Instead, it's a time for a private chat with God, no role-play, as God knows what one needs before one asks. Wow! That's strange. Yes, it's odd. We must face God with our genuine selves and not repeat empty words, but only those we can honestly manage. Prayer is not simply talking, singing, or reciting but creating a context in which one interacts with the living God. Baptism is not a rite but a moment for commitment.

So, did Jesus' prayer open the heaven? No. That's not Luke's implication. Instead, it signified the moment for God to disclose Jesus' identity. The purpose of Jesus' baptism was not to give him membership of an existing community, like admission to the Church, but the power and authority to create a new one, the kingdom of God. There's no need to worry about the winnowing fork in this kingdom, whether one is the wheat that goes into the granary or the chaff that will be burnt with unquenchable fire. There'll be no Rapture, but a completely different understanding about the end of time. Baptism is that marker.

Did a dove descend from heaven on Jesus? Did it land on his shoulder or head or just hovering above? Apparently, that's not the picture Luke tried to paint to describe the relationship between the Holy Spirit and Jesus. John the Baptist

said that the more powerful One would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. That reminds us of what occurred on Pentecost. (Acts 2) However, Pentecost could only represent a tiny portion of the Holy Spirit's work. Luke wanted to pinpoint that the salvation Jesus provided and the giving of the Holy Spirit are inseparable, that materialized in Jesus' multifaceted work in his public ministry and was confirmed through a series of events: his death, resurrection, and ascension to God's right hand. Jesus' baptism was an entry point of God's salvific work which will occur again and again in the lives of his followers.

"You are my Son, the Beloved." Did Luke reserve this lovely father-son relationship to Jesus alone? No. Luke also called Adam the son of God in Jesus' genealogy. (Luke 3:38) When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he taught them to say "Father" at the very beginning of their prayer. (Luke 11: 2)

So the godly love is for all. So all could be God's beloved. We can see it in Jesus' case, in our cases, and others as well. The account of Jesus' baptism does not provide us with an archetype showing how the ritual of baptism is done, but a declaration of a revolutionary commitment to God's plan and the well-being of God's people. We need to keep our eyes and ears open so that we won't miss seeing and hearing about the Holy Spirit's work.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaritans, whom the Jews saw at best as apostates, had accepted the word of God, baptized in the name of Jesus, but the Holy Spirit had not come on any of them, they sent Peter and John to them. They presupposed that baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit should come together. (Acts 8:14-17) After that, Peter was inspired by the case of Cornelius, a Gentile. The Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and all with him before

baptism. (Acts 10:9-11:18) Which would set the priority, the rules we understand, or the Holy Spirit?

"You are my Son, the Beloved." How should we respond to this love as God's Beloved? Should we keep it to ourselves, keep it in a specific form so that we can manage, or pass it on? Do you know that the Salvation Army doesn't baptize? But they experience salvation through their commitment. The voice of God still speaks today, a word of love and promise to all baptized in different ways. Are we following the Holy Spirit, expressed that in our prayers, materialize it in our ministries, show it to the ones we care about? Where do you hear God's voice in your life, my Beloved? Amen.