

**Luke 3:15-22 (NRSV)**

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.”

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. <sup>19</sup> But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup> added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

*The Baptism of Jesus*

*(Mt 3.13—17; Mk 1.9—11; Jn 1.29—34)*

<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, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

## When Did It Happen?

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*Text: Luke 3:15-22*

On a bright, warm day in the first century a young Galilean follower of John the Baptist waded into the water of the Jordan River where he was baptized. Already, in that sentence, there are interesting complexities. The Gospels are filled with subplots and intrigue, and never more than here at the moment of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus seems to have been at first a follower of John the Baptist. For the early church, that was something of an embarrassment. How could the son of God be a follower of John the Baptist, an ordinary human prophet?

The Gospel of Luke handles the problem in three very interesting ways. As in all of the Gospels, John goes to great pains to say that the one he is baptizing is far greater than he himself. "I am not worthy to tie his sandals. He will baptize you with fire and the Holy Spirit, not just with water," he says. But even before that, and unique to Luke, in the beautiful and heartwarming birth stories, we discover that Elizabeth and Mary are cousins. John and Jesus are kin, family. They are on the same team. There is no need for rivalry. And finally, also unique to Luke, it would appear that John may not have baptized Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke John is in prison before Jesus is baptized, and the text says only, "when Jesus had been baptized." No human is identified as Jesus' baptizer. There's more than meets the eye in these Bible stories.

There is another way in which Jesus' baptism raises a very interesting question. It says, "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." The Son of God .

Let's have some fun with a few provocative questions, questions that I hope will lead us ever more into the meaning of the Gospel for you and me.

So, Jesus is the son of God. When did it happen? When did Jesus become the son of God? Well, if we stick with Luke for a minute, we'd have to say that it was when Mary became pregnant. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," it says in Luke 1:35. But we are left to believe that Jesus, like any human son, grew into the role. Last week we heard that at twelve he was growing in both divine and human favor. Here at his baptism, he seems to have come to fully pleased God. So we can answer that Jesus was the son of God from conception but that like any human he matured as he grew up.

But wait a minute. The son of God matures? He gets better, more pleasing? He wasn't always perfectly pleasing? That doesn't seem right, does it?

That can't be right. Let's flip to the next book in the Bible, the Gospel of John. That will certainly straighten us out. There, there it is: "In the beginning was the word. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." Whew, just like I thought, Jesus was the real deal from the very beginning, even when the earth was a formless void and darkness was over the face of the deep. Jesus, the Word, was right there in the beginning, hovering over the face of the waters.

*(Someone shouts out, Well, what about Romans 1:3 and 4?)* Oh my goodness, let's flip to that. Here it is: "God's Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God ... by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." Whoa, does that really say that he became the son of God at his resurrection? Yes, it surely does. That's even worse than Luke. Paul thinks Jesus was just an ordinary guy until God raised him.

*(Someone yells out, But what about Paul's letter to the Phillipians?)* Good point. It says in chapter two of Philippians: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name." Ahh! That one says Jesus was in the form of God, then became human and humble to death on a cross. Then it says that God then exalted him. God exalted him from death. So Jesus was divine from the beginning, but I guess that when he became Jesus the man on earth he gave up his power, so God had to raise him, because he couldn't do it himself.

Goodness gracious, this is all just too confusing. And what's the point, anyway? Why did your minister harangue with all this stuff?

Well, for several reasons, really. The first is to affirm what all of you sense for yourselves when you pick up the Bible to read it. It's hard to follow because it simply is not completely consistent. It's not you. If you go to the Bible looking for the one answer of when Jesus became the son of God so you can apply your answer to what's going on at Jesus' baptism, you'll find yourself in this morass of contradictions that we've just traversed.

Second, if we insist on the consistency of the Bible, if we say that it is the inerrant word of God and a perfect and neat puzzle, then we'll spend a huge amount of energy trying to harmonize the obvious incongruities. There is book after book that tries to do just that, if you'd like to read them. They take the little exercise we've just been through and then spend page after page showing how what appears to be an inconsistency really isn't one. Page after page, hour after hour of mental gymnastics. The only problem is that at the end of the day, forgotten in the project, is what does this text want to say to us? If we tie the Bible up in enough knots, we will either never address what the Bible is actually trying to say to us, or we will read it through such contorted lenses that we'll find nothing in it but distortion.

In our tradition, in the United Church of Christ, in the progressive church, we are very lucky, because we can look at the Bible with open minds and open hearts. We can accept that each story and each author is turning the truth to the light differently, examining one of the many facets of this diamond we love. We are allowed to let each reading stand to a large degree on its own, knowing that next week we'll look at a different facet, and the truth will be told differently, maybe quite differently.

So, today we return to Luke's version of Jesus' baptism. As we've already seen, the plot line in part is meant to explain the connection between John the Baptist and Jesus. It means to demonstrate that they are friends, not rivals, but that Jesus is primary.

There's more there, though, much more. We find Jesus praying. He's just been baptized, and the dove descends. The voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We don't have to get caught up in the fine points of whether Jesus was already God's son and he somehow forgot and had to be reminded, or that this moment is when

he became God's son, or anything like that. We can focus on this moment in Jesus' life, when something new happened and his ministry began. We can notice that it was connected with his baptism. It was connected with prayer. Spiritual connection between God and Jesus is represented by the descending dove. And it is out of this connection with God that his life's work begins, is sustained and ends.

Surely, in the early church this was what many of those first Christians saw in their own baptisms. They marked a new beginning in their lives. In terms Paul might have used, they took off the old self, or washed it away in the waters of baptism, and put on a new self. Baptism was a rite of new beginning, an acknowledgment of receiving and being guided by the spirit of God. It was the beginning of a new commitment, a new life, of being made new altogether. And the Spirit strengthened them for this new life.

In each of the Gospels, after his baptism Jesus faces the temptation of the devil. To get caught up in whether the divine Jesus could have actually been tempted by the devil is to miss the point altogether. The point is that Jesus went into the temptation girded by the power of prayer and the Holy Spirit. So, too, the early Christians saw themselves supported in their new commitments by these same powers. They, like we, knew they would face temptations. But they could also know that the new day on which they were embarking was not dependent just on themselves. They could assuredly rest in the companionship of the living God.

As we say in our own baptismal service, "In baptism God works in us the power of forgiveness, the renewal of the Spirit, and the knowledge of the call to be God's people always."

In Jesus' baptism we are meant to sense our own calling, to know that God is with us always, in every temptation, and that from the beginning and yet brand new every day we are children of the living God. To this we are heirs. Thanks be to God. Amen.