

January 9, 2022  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism of Our Lord  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Who Am I?”**

*“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

I do not remember many of the sermons that I have preached during my ordained ministry, but one that sticks in my mind is one of the first sermons I preached here at Zion. It involved an incident in a donut shop in New York City, a stop I often made on my way to the Metropolitan New York Synod offices. Since I was planning to make a hospital visit on my way home, I dressed in my black clerical collar, which caught the attention of another patron in the donut shop, who was staring at me as I waited my turn in line. Being familiar with the New York tradition of not making eye contact, I tried to ignore the man’s stares; but soon he yelled across the shop, “Who are you?” At first, I thought he might be addressing someone else; but when I saw him continuing to stare at me while asking this question, I asked him what he meant by his question. His response indicated that he was both very observant and very confused: “You’re dressed like a priest, but you’re wearing a wedding ring. Who are you?” I began to explain that I am a Lutheran pastor, and that our church allows its clergy to marry; but this was not the answer he was looking for, since he shook his head and stormed out of the donut shop, leaving me the centre of attention among the other patrons waiting for their coffee and donuts.

I think that I remember that episode and sermon because the question that man asked me was both surprising and significant, since it gets to the heart of my identity both in my personal and ecclesiastical life. I have been an ordained minister for many years, and my practice of ministry is an essential part of who I am. As Susan and I celebrate our wedding anniversary this month, the wedding ring that I always wear is both a symbol and remembrance of the vows we made to each other when we were united in holy matrimony. There are many other ways in which I identify myself: my family of origin, our ancestral roots in Denmark and Germany, my home in New Jersey, our home here in Stratford, my hobbies and interests. There are many ingredients that are included when any of us attempt to answer that central question, “Who are you?”

The season of the church year into which we enter this Sunday invites us to consider the answer to the question that is at the heart of our Christian faith: Who is Jesus of Nazareth? What does it mean for us to have faith in him as the Christ, the Son of the

living God? Why is our faith entered on this man who was born in a manger in Bethlehem, the man who was worshipped by shepherds and magi, the one who we believe is *“fully God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also fully human, born of the virgin Mary”* (Small Catechism)? Throughout the weeks of the season of Epiphany, we will be invited to consider the many ways the identity of Jesus will be revealed to us, *“so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”* (Luke 1:4).

- “The season of Epiphany is the most important season because this is the season in which we come to see who Jesus is, where he is to be found, and where we begin to understand what he is about. Everything we say, everything we do in church in these coming weeks is part of this growing process of discovery of who Jesus is and where he is to be found.” – Peter Gomes.

The season of Epiphany begins with the story of the visit of the Magi, who follow the star to the place where Jesus is residing with his mother Mary in Bethlehem. Upon seeing the child, *“they were overwhelmed with joy ... and they knelt down and paid him homage”* (Matthew 2:10-11), recognizing that he is indeed *“the child who has been born king of the Jews”* (2:2). The first Sunday after the Day of Epiphany brings us to the banks of the river Jordan, where Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. John is a central figure in all four Gospels (while there is no account of a baptism in the Fourth Gospel, John is the one who points toward Jesus and declares, *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* – John 1:29). Luke’s Gospel devotes a great deal of its narrative to the story of the birth of John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth; the angel Gabriel announces that their son *“will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”* (Luke 1:16-17). On the day of his circumcision and naming, his father rejoices that his child *“will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”* (1:76-77). The child of Zechariah and Elizabeth will be the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: *“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”* (Isaiah 40:3).

John the Baptist’s first adult appearance in Luke’s Gospel occurs when *“the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”* (3:2-3). Large crowds come out to the Jordan River to hear John’s preaching and to receive his baptism; and soon *“the people were filled with expectation, and all were*

*questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah”* (3:15). In the last two centuries before the birth of Christ, the expectation of a Davidic Messiah had emerged in Palestinian Judaism. Nathan’s oracle to David that *“your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever”* (2 Samuel 7:16) fueled speculation regarding a future king in the line of David, fulfilling the promises made by the prophets:

- *“But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.”* – Jeremiah 30:9.
- *“They shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes.”* – Ezekiel 37:23-24.

John immediately shoots down any speculation that he might be the Messiah; John identifies himself as the forerunner of the Messiah, *not* the Messiah himself (*“This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’”* – John 1:19-20). John the Baptism states emphatically that *“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 sandal.”* (3:16). The “coming One” whose way John is preparing would be greater than John, a reference to Malachi’s prophecy of the coming of the Lord: *“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”* (Malachi 3:1). John baptizes with water, a baptism of repentance; the coming One would be so much greater than John that he would not be worthy even to untie the thong of his sandals. Untying sandals was such a menial duty that it was expected only of slaves; disciples were not expected to untie their master’s sandals. Luke will return to the theme of the “coming One” when the imprisoned Baptizer sends his disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”* (7:20). As Jesus points John to his deeds as proof of his identity (*“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”* – 7:22), John points the crowds to the deeds of the coming One who *“will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”* (3:16), a precursor of the experience of the apostles on the day of Pentecost:

- *“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,*

and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” – Acts 2:1-4.

John turns to a common agricultural image to further explain the work of the coming One, the Messiah of God. At the harvest, grain was gathered to a threshing floor, where the farmer would pitch the grain into the air with a winnowing fork. The wind would blow away the lighter chaff, but the grain itself would fall back to the floor where it would be gathered for use. The work of the coming One would be like a farmer who separates the wheat from the chaff, “*the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*” (3:17), a reference to the fire of judgment spoken of by the prophets:

- “For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of vindication by Zion’s cause. And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulphur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever.” – Isaiah 34:8-10.

The coming One whose way John the Baptist prepares “*will bring salvation for the repentant and judgment for the unrepentant.*” (Alan Culpepper).

Among the people who come to the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John is Jesus. This is the first appearance of Jesus as an adult in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and it marks the beginning of his ministry. In Matthew’s Gospel, John the Baptist is at first reluctant to baptize Jesus, saying that “*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*” (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus insists that John baptize him, “*for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness*” (3:15). Luke does not include this exchange; in fact, Jesus has already been baptized when he is introduced to us after he “*had been baptized and was praying*” (Luke 3:21). The importance of prayer is a recurring emphasis in Luke; the announcement of John’s birth occurred at an hour of prayer (1:10), and the Gospel reports times when Jesus prays at significant junctures in his ministry:

- “Now during those days he went out to the mountains to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.” – 6:12.
- “Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only his disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’” – 9:18.

- “Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed: ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’” – 22:41-42.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Luke should emphasize that Jesus was praying at the time when “*the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.*” (3:21-22). The opening of heaven was an apocalyptic motif found in both Old Testament and New Testament apocalyptic writings:

- “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence” – Isaiah 64:1.
- “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” – John 1:51.
- “Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.” – Revelation 19:11.

The opening of heaven at the baptism of Jesus signals that he is the Messiah and that the fulfillment of Israel’s eschatological expectations is at hand; “*God’s power and mercy is about to be unleashed.*” (Culpepper). The coming of the Spirit upon Jesus commissioned and empowered him for his ministry, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that “*the spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour*” (Isaiah 61:1-2). The voice from heaven was another common feature in apocalyptic literature (“*And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’*” – Revelation 4:1). The voice from heaven declares that “*you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*” (3:22). The affirmation of Jesus as God’s Son resonates with declarations of sonship throughout Israel’s history. The king was acclaimed son of God in Psalm 2:7 (“*I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’*”); the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary that her child would be called the “*Son of the Most High*” (1:32). The servant of God is described in Isaiah as “*my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations*” (Isaiah 42:1). “Beloved” (*agapetos*) is used in Luke only on two other occasions: at the Transfiguration (“*This is my Son, my Beloved; listen to him!*” – 9:35) and in the parable of the wicked tenants (“*What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.*” – 20:13). “Well pleased” (*eudokeo*) is

an attribute reserved only for God, as in the chorus of angels who sang “*glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!*” (2:14). “*The voice from heaven, therefore, discloses both the identity of the Son and the character of the Father*” (Culpepper).

As Jesus’ identity as the beloved Son of God is affirmed on the day of his baptism, our Lord will institute the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and commission his apostles to “*baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” Baptism is the sacrament through which our identity as God’s beloved children is established and affirmed; we believe that through water and the Word we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). As the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River, we believe that on the day of our baptism we are “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*” Martin Luther teaches us that in baptism the Holy Spirit is “*poured on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This saying is sure.*” (*Small Catechism*). Baptism was Luther’s assurance that no matter what challenges he faced, he could be certain of his identity as a beloved child of God. It is said that in his hours of deepest distress Luther would stand up, face down the devil that he believed was tormenting him, and yell: “*I am baptized!*” Our sure identity as God’s beloved children gave Dietrich Bonhoeffer the faith to declare that even when all other means of identification were stripped from him, the answer to the question “*who am I?*” as never in doubt:

- “Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.” – *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

There are many ways in which I can answer the question “Who are you?” I am a husband, a pastor, a child of Danish and German ancestors, a native of New Jersey, a singer, a fan of the New York Yankees. But there is one form of identity that will never change, that can never be taken away from me. It is the identity that is ours when we are claimed by God on the day of our baptism, when we hear the words that our Lord Jesus Christ heard on the banks of the Jordan; they are the words that affirm that we are God’s children, God’s beloved – *that’s who we are!*

Amen.