

If I asked you to picture the nativity, you could pretty easily imagine a stable, Mary and Joseph and a baby, probably shepherds, maybe a few singing angels. If I asked you to picture the epiphany, you can dream up foreign travelers offering gifts to the child Jesus and his mother. If I ask you to picture Jesus' baptism, what do you come up with? Lots of people gathered by the shore of a great river, a stern looking John the Baptist plunging them into the waters, Jesus having a discussion with a reluctant John and finally going under the waters to the rumbling sound of the voice of God and the sight of a dove coming in for a landing. That is roughly what you find in the other gospels but today we have Luke and his scene is a bit different.

First of all, living in the Ohio Valley the word "*river*" can confuse us. The Jordan is typically about 60 feet wide at most and often a lot narrower and for most of the year it's a sluggish little stream generally about 3 ft. deep. Luke says everyone else had already been baptized; it's probably late in the day and they were all heading home. In Luke's version Jesus may have been baptized with hardly one else around. And then he goes off to pray. And in that very private moment he senses the gentle touch of God, as light as a dove, and hears the voice that says, "**You are my son. You are my beloved. I am well pleased with you.**" In other words, it wasn't a public event. It was a personal and private experience. No one else heard that voice from heaven. He came out of the water, went off by himself, and prayed. That is when it happened. Luke, more than any other gospel, emphasizes that Jesus prayed.

Jesus often went off by himself to pray. And when Jesus prayed, something happened, especially at those critical points in his life, when he was facing a crisis, or a decision, or a time of doubt, or questions. At those points when he prayed, there were epiphanies, special manifestations of God, just like the one at his baptism. And I suspect they were the same every time. Each time he was reminded of his identity, "**You are my Son,**" and renewed power and vision for his life, through the Spirit.

In the Gospel of Luke there are three times when he receives such confirmations. One is at the beginning of his ministry, at his baptism. Then at the middle of his ministry, at "The Transfiguration," when he goes off by himself to a mountain. But this time he takes with him Peter, James, and John. While he is on top of the mountain **praying**, a voice again says, "This is my Son. Listen to him." That confirmation is not only for Jesus, it is also for the disciples. Then at the end of his ministry, the last night of his life, he went off by himself again, to the Garden of Gethsemane. We know that he prayed there and I think the answer again was "**You are my Son, my beloved; I will never leave you.**"

Luke is writing his gospel for Christians, those who have been baptized. He is telling them, your baptism means the same as Jesus' baptism. You are God's daughter, or God's son, with you God is well pleased. You are a child of God and **That** is one of the most radical dimensions of Jesus' preaching. He preached that you and I can have the same personal, intimate relationship with God that he had as the Son of God. For persons in Jesus' time that was blasphemy.

It is probably one of the reasons they plotted to arrest him. In those days only certain people, it was thought, could have that kind of relationship with God. The Messiah, certainly, that makes sense. Kings, they were anointed, so they must have a special relationship with God. Prophets, they were chosen, so probably they, too, would have that special relationship with God. But that was it. Not common folk. Not people like you and me. Our relationship with God, they said, is like the accused before a judge, and God, therefore, is distant, stern, righteous, and unchanging.

Jesus shocked his society by saying, **"God is not like that. God will be with you the same way he was with me, a father to a child. God desires to have that relationship with everyone."** There are few commands that Jesus gave the disciples. One was, when you pray, say, "Our Father." The other was, "Go into all of the world baptizing everybody in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Which is to say, go baptize people so they will have the experience that I did in knowing that I am a child of God. Then teach them how to pray, "Our Father."

The exclusiveness that characterized all religions up to that point was shattered, just demolished by that preaching. The hierarchy of class was demolished by that preaching. The segregation by race, the division by gender, the separation that is caused by poverty and wealth in our society, all of that collapsed with that command.

Now a few words about this parental image, It is tempting to think of it in terms of dependency, the way that small children are dependent upon their parents.

But it is not like that. It is like the relationship of a parent to an adult child: not intervening, but loving and supporting, being there. Not the love that protects, but the love that empowers. It was that way with Jesus. God did not protect Jesus from all of the pains and problems of this human life. In fact, that was one of the temptations that the devil threw at him in the scene that comes, incidentally, right after the baptism. The devil tempts him by saying, use your special relationship with God to show that you are superhuman. Jesus resisted that temptation so that he would be like us. His relationship with God was like our relationship with God, like that of an independent, adult child. The love that a parent has for a minor child is a love that intervenes. It ought to. That's a love that wants to protect a child. But the love a parent has for an adult child is the love that stands by, a love that encourages.

A daughter calls home, talks to her parents about a great disappointment in her life, how she feels. She talks about what she can do now. They talk about all this. At the end the parents say, "We wish we could do something." She says, "You have done a lot just being there. I can feel your love. It helps. Thanks for being there."

I think it must have been like that when Jesus prayed to God in those critical moments in his life. His identity was confirmed, "You are my Son." He was assured that he is loved, "You are my beloved." He was assured that God would always be with him. How close that is to any parent reaching out to an adult child, saying, "We love you. We are proud of you." Maybe we heard that from our own family and sadly for any number of reasons some never will.

But Luke wants you to know that because of Jesus Christ, you can hear that from God, your Heavenly Father. Just as Jesus, at critical times in his life, went apart to hear those words again, so at critical moments in our lives, when we need to be reminded of who we are, when we need to have renewed direction and purpose and power in our lives, there will be epiphanies. When once again you will hear, "You are my daughter, You are my son, I will never leave you." Allow yourself that time apart, that time of prayer, when the gentle voice of God can break through and remind us of who we really are and how amazing that is.