

We begin a new season of Epiphany, the season when we celebrate the different ways that the light of God shines forth, the different ways that God is manifest in the world. On this first Sunday of the season of Epiphany, we always celebrate and remember Jesus' baptism. We always read a gospel account of Jesus' baptism. This year we read from the 3rd chapter of Luke.

But if you noticed, Luke doesn't spend much time on Jesus' baptism. Instead, he focuses on what happens next. Luke says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..." Notice what a glancing blow that is. When they were baptized Jesus also was baptized. But... Look what happens next.

"Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove."

That's language that said there was some kind of spiritual vision. And the vision is accompanied by a voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

These are rich words which combine rich themes from the OT. Themes of acknowledgment as God's son. Themes of messiahship and kingship. Themes of blessing and approval. But most important, these words are ontological. Big word. But a big idea behind it.

If you've had the fortune or misfortune to study any philosophy, you might remember ontology. Ontology is all about being. What you are as opposed to what you do. Being as opposed to function.

God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The question is, "Why is God pleased with Jesus?"

Is he pleased at this point with what Jesus has done? No, because at this point, Jesus hasn't done much of anything. He was conceived, but he didn't have much control over that. He was born. Again, not much control there. He asked questions of the teachers in the Temple when he was 12. Every kid asks questions.

But God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The Father is giving his Son ontological love. He loves the Son for who he is, not for anything he has done.

What Jesus will do later is vitally important. You can't get any more important than the crucifixion and resurrection. But long before Jesus humbles himself to death, the Father expresses his love for him. Before Jesus has done any teaching, before Jesus has performed any miracles, God says, 'You are my beloved.'

And this is such an important concept for Christians to grasp. In our culture we're very much into cause and effect. We're very much into reward and punishment. We're very much into earning and achieving. And because of that, we distort the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What can I do to make God love me? Nothing.
What can I do to earn salvation? Nothing.
What can I do? Nothing.
It's not about us.

It's about God. It's about God's nature. It's about grace, not works. As 1John says, "We love, because (God) first loved us."¹ God takes the initiative. God loves us before we're worthy of love. Not for what we've done. But for who we are.

You parents. When did you first love your kids? When they were able to tie their own shoes? When they graduated from High School? When they got a job? No. You probably loved them the very first time you held them in your arms. Long before they'd done anything to deserve that love.

That's the way it is with God. God loves us. You are God's beloved. Not for what you do, but for who you are.

Important caveat. Does that mean you can do anything? Does a parent's love mean that there are no rules and that a child can do anything they want? Of course not. There have to be boundaries, rules, and consequences. But God's love is not dependent upon whether you've been naughty or nice. If you've been naughty there may be consequences. But God's love won't be any less. God loves you for who you are, not for what you've done. And sometimes, in spite of what you've done.

Also, God's love is not dependent upon your emotions or feelings. It doesn't matter if you're mad at God. It doesn't matter if you feel cold and distant. It doesn't matter if you're spiritually smiling or pouting. God's love is still there.

Earlier we heard one of God's great love songs to his people in our OT lesson from Isaiah 43. God is speaking to all his people corporately. But you can also listen individually. God says,

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Why? Why all these good things? Why this special treatment from God?

God says in Isaiah, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

¹ 1Jn 4:19

You are precious. I love you.

Can you hear God saying this to you? Can you live into this wonderful affirmation?

So often, people treat the Christian Gospel as preventative medicine, as something negative. Do we bring our kids to get baptized as a sort of inoculation? Is it because we don't want our kids to go to hell, so we get them baptismal "fire insurance"?

No, we bring our children to the font because we want them to grow up in the knowledge and love of God.

Why do I want salvation? As a get out of Hell free card? No. I want to put my trust in Jesus Christ because I seek relationship with him forever. I want to be with him forever.

Why do I want to spend time in prayer and worship? Because I'm supposed to? No. I want to be with the one I love, the one who loves me.

Why do I what God commands? Because if I do I'll go to heaven and if I don't I'll be punished? No. I want to do it in order to become more and more like the one who loves me. God loves me. And I want to become more and more loving myself. As I grow up, I want to be like my heavenly Father.

Jesus calls us all to be reborn of water and the spirit so that we may embrace the love the Father has for us. And Jesus calls us to live new lives in response to that love.

Listen for his voice. "You are my beloved..."

Listen for his voice. And live in his love.