

“The Real One”

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

Several years ago, we stopped for lunch at a diner on the Trans Canada Highway in New Brunswick as we were traveling to Nova Scotia. During our meal, I began to notice that several people in the diner were looking at me and talking amongst themselves. I first thought that maybe I had some ketchup on my face or something in my hair; but eventually a waitress came to our table and asked if I was the anchorman at a local news station. Of course, I had to tell her that I was not that person; but evidently, someone who looks like me is reporting the news in that part of the world. Everyone was very cordial to us for the rest of our meal, but clearly they were disappointed that I was not the local celebrity they had first thought that I might be.

It's not uncommon for people to be mistaken for someone else. It is said that everyone has a twin somewhere in the world, and sometimes people bear an uncanny resemblance to a famous person. Many people who have similar looks can make good money as professional impersonators, especially of a person who is famous – or infamous – at the time. But there is a dark side to mistaken identity as well; some people may present themselves as “the real one,” seeking to fool us into placing our trust in them; but when it is revealed that they are a fraud, the result can be a loss of confidence in believing that a person is truly who they claim to be. Experience often makes us suspicious in believing that a person really is who they claim to be.

When John the Baptist begins his ministry in the Judean wilderness, he makes such a strong impression on the crowds who come out to be baptized by him that *“the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah”* (Luke 3:15). The people who were suffering under Roman oppression yearned for the promised one who would come as a mighty warrior to liberate them from their bondage and restore Israel to the nation it had been under David and Solomon. Expectations of a Davidic Messiah had emerged in Palestinian Judaism in the last two centuries B.C. Nathan's oracle to David (*“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”* – 2 Samuel 7:16) fueled speculation concerning a future David (*“But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them.”* – Jeremiah 30:9). Unfortunately, their search for the Messiah (“anointed one”) had been fruitless; many had falsely presented themselves as this promised one, but they soon proved to be imposters. But John bore many of the marks of the Messiah, leading some to speculate whether he was indeed “to one who is to come.”

But when John hears this speculation, he immediately makes a clear distinction between who he is and the identity of the Messiah. In his announcement of the coming of the anointed one, John points to the one who is greater than he who is to come, the one who is the real Messiah:

- “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. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” – 3:16-17.

John identifies himself as the forerunner of the Messiah, not the Messiah himself (*“He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’”* – John 1:20), pointed to the “one who is to come” as one who would be greater than John. John is the messenger who fulfills the promise spoken by the prophet Malachi:

"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." (Malachi 3:1). John emphasizes four ways that the Messiah will be greater than he:

1. John baptizes with water while the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.
2. The Coming One is more powerful than he.
3. John is not worthy to untie the sandal of the Coming One.
4. The Coming One will bring salvation to the repentant and judgment for the unrepentant.

Luke does not report on the actual baptism of Jesus, only the events that followed. The baptism of Jesus occurs after John's arrest (3:19) and marks the succession: John's work is completed, while Jesus' ministry is about to begin. What Luke does report is that *"when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying"* (3:21); prayer will be a recurring emphasis in Luke's writings:

- *"Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?'"* – 9:18.
- *"Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray."* – 9:28.
- *"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.
- *"All these [disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."* – Acts 1:14.

While Jesus is praying, Luke reports that *"the heaven was opened, 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.'" (3:21b-22).* The opening of heaven is an apocalyptic motif found in writings in both the Old and New Testaments:

- *"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 the 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."* (Alan Culpepper). The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus commissioned and empowered him for his ministry (as the Spirit will empower the apostles on the day of Pentecost, when they were *"filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."* – Acts 2:4). The "voice from heaven" was another common feature in apocalyptic literature (*"Then a voice came from heaven: 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'"* – John 12:28). The heavenly attestation characterizes the Father's relationship to the Son with two references to writings in the Old Testament:

- *"I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'"* – Psalm 2:7.
- *"Here is 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” (*agepetos*) is used to refer to Jesus on two other occasions in Luke, including at the Transfiguration: “*This is my Son, by Beloved; listen to him!*” (9:35). “Well pleased” (*eudokeo*) is an attribute reserved only for God, heard in the song the angelic chorus sings at the birth of Jesus: “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!*” (2:14). The voice at the baptism of Jesus discloses the identity of the Son and identifies the marks of the real Messiah as being both sovereignty and service. The real Messiah has indeed come to reign over God’s people, but the marks of his reign will be as a servant of all: “*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*” (Mark 10:45).

- “Jesus is baptized not to repent of sins, for he is without sin, but to establish and give witness to a relationship that shows that he belongs to God and is called to do God’s work in the world ... He is baptized to manifest both to heaven and to earth that he, Jesus Christ, is the means by which God will accomplish his will and work on earth.” – Peter Gomes.

The Baptism of Our Lord is set at the beginning of the season of Epiphany, a word that can mean both “a manifestation of divine or supernatural being” and “a moment of sudden revelation or insight.” Throughout these Sundays after Epiphany (which this year continues through the Transfiguration of Our Lord on March 3), we will reflect on “*the means through which God is made manifest in the world in Jesus Christ*” (*Sundays and Seasons*). As the voice from heaven identifies Jesus as the Real One, the fulfillment of God’s messianic promises in the coming of the Beloved Son of God, we are called to place our trust and confidence solely in the one who is our true Lord and Saviour. It is a season in which we affirm the faith that we professed in Holy Baptism, that Jesus Christ, “*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord.*” (*Small Catechism*). It is a season in which we affirm our faith in Jesus as the one and only Messiah, the true “Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords,” confessing that Christ is the solid rock on which we stand, while “*all other ground is sinking sand.*”

- “With these words [God] says to us nothing other than this: There I give to you all my grace, love, and blessing, which I have in my heart and my power ... He shall be the token and pledge of my grace and love against your sin and fear. And inasmuch as he is by birth and right the true heir and Lord of all creatures, so in him you will become my children and joint heirs, and inherit all that he possesses in his power ... What more could he have given or done for us, and what greater or better thing could the human heart desire or conceive?” – Martin Luther, Sermon on Holy Baptism, Epiphany 1535.

As we know the identity of Jesus – that he is the Real One, the true Messiah of God, the Beloved Son who became flesh and lived among us “*full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14) – so also do we know that in Holy Baptism we are truly children of God, the beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. In the waters of baptism, we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the body of Christ.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). Because we are baptized in the name of the one who is our true Lord and Saviour, we have the assurance that we are truly God’s people and that the Word that is spoken by Jesus Christ is the real, authentic Word of God. Our baptism in Christ Jesus also reminds us that as Christ was identified in his baptism as God’s Son who would manifest himself as a servant, our call as God’s baptized people is to serve others as the embodiment of Christ’s love in the world into which God has called us.

- “As we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, we remember the Father’s delight in him and the Spirit’s resting upon him in the bodily form of a dove. We remember, too, his subsequent obedience to the Father’s will for the sake of our redemption. With humility, we ‘remember always that our baptism represents unto us our profession; which is, to follow our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him; that as he died and rose again for us, so should we ... die from sin, and rise again unto righteousness,

continually mortifying all evil desires, and daily increasing in all virtue and godliness of living.’ (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 530).” – Archbishop Fred Hiltz, Anglican Church of Canada.

As John the Baptist languishes in Herod’s prison, he begins to have doubts as to whether the one who way he had prepared is truly the Messiah; so he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him, “*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*” (Matthew 11:3). Instead of giving John a simple “yes or no” answer, Jesus points to his works as the proof of his identity:

- “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” – Matthew 11:4-6.

As the proof of Jesus’ authenticity is seen in his life and ministry, the fulfillment of God’s promises to God’s people, so does the proof that we are truly God’s holy people, children of the heavenly Father, come when we are faithful to the promises we affirm in our Baptism in Christ Jesus: “*to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*” (ELW Affirmation of Baptism). We witness to the reality of Jesus Christ as Lord as well as the reality of who we are as the people of God in both our sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with others and in embodying Christ’s love in our service to all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus.

- “What is required now is the kind of earnest and informed commitment to Jesus as the Christ that will be prepared as he was, through self-sacrifice, voluntary suffering, and informed, disciplined service, to *be* Christians in the midst of the world. If that kind of Christianity is *lived*, there can be no doubt about it – some, perhaps many, will ask for ‘the reason why.’ Then, and I think only then, usually, will it be appropriate and good for Christians to speak openly about their faith and ‘the hope that is in them.’” – Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*

I have sometimes wondered what might have happened if I had pretended to be the newscaster that the people in New Brunswick thought I might be. We might have had a few moments of fun, taking photographs with people who thought they were in the presence of a local celebrity; but my fraud would have been exposed when they might have asked me to prove that I was a broadcaster, something of which I know nothing. The proof of one’s authenticity is not in how one might appear to others; the proof comes when we show by our actions that we really are who we claim to be. We know that Jesus is truly the Christ, the Messiah, the Beloved Son of God both because of the voice from heaven that identifies him at the beginning of his earthly ministry and in his preaching, teaching, and healing which attests to the truth of his identity. As we know that Jesus is “the Real One” through his words and deeds, so with others know that we are “the Real Ones,” the church which is that assembly of God’s baptized people, both in our proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and our living and serving in accordance to God’s Holy Word. We are called to faithful service to our Lord not merely so that others may know that we are authentic children of God, but that “*the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*” (John 17:23).

May our lives be a real witness to our Lord Jesus, who is the Real One – the Messiah, the beloved Son of God, the one who has come that we all might be freed to “*serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*” (Luke 1:74-75). Amen.