

**Luke 3:15-18, 21-22 (New International Version)**

*The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

So, here is John, living in the desert and calling people to change their ways and get ready for the coming of someone so special that he wasn't even worthy to be a lowly servant to him. John was careful to make it clear to the people that he was not the Christ, the Messiah they were waiting for. He called the people to be baptized in the river as a symbol of their death to their old way of being, as a symbol of cleansing and renewal. And then Jesus shows up on the banks of the Jordan river.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and, although Luke's gospel doesn't mention it, Matthew's gospel tells us that John was a little freaked when Jesus came to be baptized. John said, "You should be baptizing me" but Jesus said that it should be done "to fulfill all righteousness." We aren't sure what that meant but over the last 2000 years or so, many people have speculated on why Jesus did this.

- Baptism is a symbol of death and resurrection to new life. Did Jesus do this because he was at a major turning point in his life, dying to his old life and beginning a new one?
- Water is a symbol of newness and power. Did Jesus do this because he was beginning a new ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Was it a symbol and foreshadowing of his ultimate mission, his death and resurrection?
- Was it a way for Jesus to identify with the brokenness of humanity, a symbol of solidarity?
- Was Jesus modeling humility and submission as an example for us to follow?

Scripture doesn't tell us why Jesus chose to be baptized. We just know

that the Father was pleased.

But part of why John was reluctant to baptize Jesus was because he realized that there was a greater baptism than what he offered. And that Jesus, the Messiah, would bring that baptism to the people, a baptism “with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

So, what was the difference. John's baptism focused on the individual decision to change one's life. The baptism of Jesus focuses on what God does for us. Yes, even the best of people have ways they need to change, things they need to repent of, but even more than this, we all need the salvation that only the baptism of fire and the Holy Spirit can give us. The baptism that Jesus brings burns away our pretenses, and fills us with spiritual power. The baptism that Jesus brings is not a one time event. It is a rebirth into lifelong role as a beloved child of God. As John the Baptist did, we use the symbolism of water baptism, but because of Jesus, our baptism is much more. The water ceremony is a symbol of something that seems almost too good to be true. Through Jesus, we become the chosen ones of God. The reading from Isaiah 43 tells us what it means to be chosen.

God tells us: “I created you. I formed you. I have redeemed you. I summon you by name. You are mine. I will be with you. I am your God.”

This is not some kind of exclusive superiority of Christians. God wants everyone to share in this. It is through our identity with Christ that we discover God's claim on us.

Let's look at the passage again. "And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

Heaven opened up! This was the inauguration of a new working of God. The Hebrew people had understood that they were God's chosen, but far too few others understood this. Jesus shows us that if we will just die to self, our true identity in God can be born.

Baptism is not about our repentance, our changing direction. Although our repentance is part of it, it is primarily about God. God has claimed us! We are God's own. We are God's *beloved*, God's much loved children.

Throughout the New Testament, we see the term "*beloved*" or "those loved" used as the term for the followers of Jesus Christ. In Jude 1:1 in the English Standard translation says, "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, *beloved* in God the Father and kept for

Jesus Christ”

And the title “**beloved**” also appears, referring to followers of Jesus, throughout the letters of the New Testament. The followers of Christ are called **beloved** in Romans, Hebrews, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, and Timothy! WE ARE GOD's **beloved**! WOW!

Sometime, try saying it out loud. It is truly amazing! Say, “God LOVES me,” or “GOD loves ME,” or “I am God's **beloved**,” It is almost too wonderful to believe!

The psalmist found this amazing too when he wrote “*When I consider the heavens the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have set in place, what are people that you think about us, human beings that you care for us. You made us a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned us with glory and honor.*” Psalm 8:3-5

Let us LIVE as God's beloved. And let us share the good news of our place of love and honor in Jesus Christ. AMEN.