

Beloved of the Father

by Linda Rex

January 8, 2023, EPIPHANY / Baptism of the Lord—In the season of Advent, we have prepared our hearts and minds for the entering of God into our cosmos in the incarnation. As God in human flesh, Jesus Christ came into our world to live a truly human life, and during the twelve-day season of Christmas (between Christmas and Epiphany), we celebrate this amazing gift. Pondering the richness of God's indescribable love gives depth to our holiday celebrations, enabling us to bear up under the inevitable realities of loss, grief, brokenness, and struggle.

We are reminded that it was not enough that God had compassion on us as frail and faulty human beings. It was not enough that God saw and forgave our shortcomings and incessant unfaithfulness to him. No, the Son of God chose to enter our own place of existence, into our material cosmos, and to take upon himself a truly human existence, personally forging within our human flesh the capacity and desire to live in right relationship with his own Father in the Spirit.

Our American individualism often prevents our ability to think in terms of place-sharing. So often, we seek to do things ourselves, on our own, for our own satisfaction or to accomplish our personal goals and plans. We may not even consider that a better and more fulfilling life would be ours if we opened ourselves up to the concept of place-sharing—of putting ourselves in another person's place, to understand and participate with them in what they are going through. Place-sharing is part of living a truly human life as image-bearers of the divine. And this is what Jesus did in the incarnation and invites us into as participants in his life with the Father in the Spirit.

After Christmas begins the season of Epiphany, when we begin to consider more about who this person Jesus Christ really is. What does it mean that God has come in Jesus Christ to live a truly human life? Why would this man of Middle Eastern descent, born of a virgin, raised by a carpenter, whom John believed was the sinless Messiah, come to the Jordan River and insist on being baptized?

From his birth on, Jesus' human experience involved place-sharing. Part of Jesus' truly human experience involved walking up to John that day at the Jordan River and being baptized by him for the remission of sins. Jesus' heavenly Father commissioned John to call people to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins, and in obedience to the word of the Father through John, Jesus came to be baptized—not for his own sake, but for the sake of every human being. Jesus immersed all of us in his own obedience to the Father and in his own baptism, including all of humanity in his sacrificial self-offering, in his death and resurrection.

Can you imagine the glow within the Father's heart when he saw his beloved Son willingly identifying with us and offering himself in our place on our behalf? It is no wonder the Spirit descended so lovingly and the Father's word of affirmation came in that moment, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." How delighted the Father was in his Son! He knew the extent of the sacrifice Jesus was making, having left the privileges of divinity behind to identify with us and participate with us in our messy, broken world, even when his Son knew the cost would be his own crucifixion at our hands.

John was blessed with the ability to see the divine gifting of Jesus for ministry which occurred in that moment. He had been told by God that the one upon whom the Spirit alighted as a dove would be the Messiah. And here, in this sacred moment, John bore witness to the anointing of Jesus by the Father in the Spirit for his mission and ministry in that very way. It was John's blessed privilege to participate in what God was doing by bearing witness to the person Jesus Christ was as the Anointed One. As Jesus began his messianic ministry, John heard stories of his miracles and teachings. As John bore up under the assault of the Roman government, he had to come to terms with Jesus' focus on the Father's mission and ministry. Was Jesus truly the Messiah? Was he truly the deliverer that his nation had longed for all these centuries?

The truth is, Jesus' place-sharing went far beyond simply being baptized on behalf of all. In the everyday moments of his ministry and mission, Jesus joined people where they were, scandalizing the religious elite by hobnobbing with prostitutes and tax collectors. His friends and colleagues weren't the upstanding, prestigious leaders of the community, but humble fishermen and down-to-earth people of all walks of life.

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Jesus touched the leprous and the dead, offering healing and restoration. Jesus embraced the sick and comforted the grieving, offering grace to the shamed and rejected, calling them up into a new life in right relationship with God and others. In every aspect of his life, Jesus embraced and shared life with others, without respect to their personhood or their position in the community.

Those who walked this life with Jesus bore witness to his place-sharing, and following his death and resurrection, began themselves to live and care for others as he did. In the book of Acts are stories of how those who were witnesses of Jesus' place-sharing lived themselves in ways which involved joining people where they were to bring them into renewal and transformation. We see Philip on the road, joining with a gentleman who was not understanding what he was reading from Isaiah—and the resulting conversation ended in this man's baptism.

Where might Jesus be inviting us to join with him in touching the life of another? Where might he be wanting us to enter in and become a part of someone else's journey? How might we be able to share in what another person is going through, thereby offering God's grace, compassion, and love in the midst of their suffering, sorrow, or need?

We all have been immersed in Jesus' baptism and are given to share in his receiving of the Spirit for mission and ministry. Our tangible identification with Jesus Christ in his baptism, thereby in his death and resurrection, is by being baptized ourselves into the Father, Son, and Spirit, and becoming part of the body of Christ, the Church. We also tangibly identify with Jesus Christ and participate in Jesus' baptism, thereby in his death and resurrection, as we ourselves participate in taking communion on a regular basis, eating bread and drinking wine (or grape juice) with other believers as a member of the body of Christ, the Church.

For many of us, joining a local expression of the Church isn't easy, but we need to be a part of the body of Christ which is filled with the Spirit and actively participating with Jesus in caring for and loving others, if we want to grow in spiritual maturity and participate with others in place-sharing. Asking for God's direction and guidance is a good place to start. And following the lead of the Spirit and the instruction of the Word of God, the Bible, is also helpful. In God's good time, he will lead us to where he wants to nurture and care for us spiritually, as well as work through us to nurture and care for others.

Dear Abba, our heavenly Father, thank you for delighting in us as you delighted in your own Son, Jesus. Grant us the grace by your Spirit to fully participate with you as you bring healing, renewal, and reconciliation to this world, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

“Opening his mouth, Peter said: ‘I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.’” Acts 10:34–43 NASB

“Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?’ But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted Him. After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’” Matthew 3:13–17 NASB