

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Dignity of Being Human

Luke 3:15-22

In today's text, Luke's presentation of the baptism of Jesus opens like a scene in *Where's Waldo?* Some of you are probably familiar with this series of children's books. Each book contains large illustrations depicting dozens or more people doing a variety of things at a given location. Readers are challenged to find a character named Waldo hidden somewhere in the group. Though Waldo's red-and-white-striped shirt, bobble hat, and glasses usually make him easier to spot, many of the illustrations also use red-and-white striped objects to make it more challenging to recognize the main character.

Luke doesn't want us to mistake the main character in his story. That's why he's currently in the process of shifting the spotlight from John the Baptist to Jesus. But as he does so, Luke challenges us to a little bit of "Where's Jesus?" We know Jesus is now more public, but he's also partly just a face in the crowd. "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too" (v. 21a). Where's Jesus? Oh, there he is. I see him. He's there in that multitude of people assembled alongside the Jordan River. In fact, it looks like Jesus is just standing in line with dozens of other folks, waiting for his turn to get baptized.

What kind of launch event is this? This is no way for the Messiah to introduce himself to the public. Where's the speaker's platform lined with flags? Where's the confetti falling from the ceiling? Where's the rousing motivational music? Where's the security detail forming a human barrier between the Savior and his supporters? Instead, the Messiah shows up as just another face in the crowd of repentant sinners preparing to get dunked.

Though this doesn't fit with our human expectations of how the Anointed One should inaugurate his ministry, it certainly fits with the way that Luke has described God's coming to rescue us. A Savior born in humble circumstances, where there was little room to lay him except in a feeding trough. A newborn king visited by shepherds, some of society's most marginal and disreputable citizens. A global ruler raised in a very typical Jewish home where religious customs and practices were diligently observed. Our Lord didn't bypass the rhythms and routines, the ordinariness, of human life. He didn't hover above the brokenness of the world or skirt around the edges of its harsh realities and relentless unrighteousness. Instead, Luke tells us that Jesus stepped right in, even to the point of wading into the muddy waters of the Jordan, so as to identify himself with us and to show us that our fallenness doesn't put us beyond the reach of God's redemption.

When God reached out to us, he didn't keep a safe distance. Rather, he became one of us. He participated in our humanity, which included having a body. Remember that by this point, it's a thirty-year-old body. Luke even says so in the verse immediately following today's text. But it has taken a couple of chapters to get there. On one occasion when I was sharing God's word with the children in our day care ministry, I pulled out a copy my birth certificate and showed them my footprints as a newborn. Strangely, the line on my certificate for length in inches was blank, so I'm not sure of my exact size at birth. I asked the children what size they thought Jesus was when he was born. Some held their hands up, one to two feet apart. Some brought their thumb and index fingers together within an inch or less to indicate a very tiny Jesus.

And don't overlook the fact that Luke has already told us a story from the beginning of Jesus' early adolescence. Like many boys at age twelve, he was probably starting to feel more self-conscious about his body. Within a year or two, facial hair would start to appear, his voice would begin to change, and his testosterone levels would jump. He would begin to develop the capacity to think in broader terms and to see how abstract ideas are connected to each other. In other words, Jesus was entering a phase of life that involved major physical, cognitive, and emotional changes. His childhood was starting to close and the challenges of adulthood were approaching. Luke then leaps over eighteen years of further growth and development, and invites us to gather at the river, where Jesus begins his public ministry.

I highlight Jesus' growth and development because it tells us something important about God's way of coming to save us. It tells us that almighty God took on human life, and by taking on human life affirmed the goodness and value of being human. That includes the fact that we have bodies, that we're physical beings. Our physicality isn't an obstacle to our spirituality. It's part of our spirituality. Yes, we have to face the reality of our weakness, our frailty, our sinfulness, and everything about us that's not yet fully redeemed, this side of the final resurrection. But we can always do so with the assurance, as the writer of Hebrews says, that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (4:15). Jesus, the sinless one, doesn't accomplish God's purpose from a remote location. Instead, Jesus joins us in our location, and by doing so joins us to God in restored communion.

When we confess that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, we aren't declaring that the human part was just a costume that Jesus wore for the duration of his mission, only to toss it aside when it was no longer necessary. No, the incarnation, God becoming flesh, is a remarkable affirmation of our dignity and eternal value as human beings, men and women, boys and girls, made in the image of God, loved by God, and redeemed by God in Christ. Whether that life is the unborn baby in the womb, the elderly person in Hospice care, or someone at any stage in between, we proclaim and practice our conviction that life matters. It matters because God, the giver of life, entered into this life through Jesus, so that we could have life everlasting.

That means not only life beyond death, but life before death as well. And Jesus, the beloved Son, is the one who shows us what that kind of life looks like. Not because he's just a good ethical teacher or a nice role model, but because he is God embodied, animated fully by the power of the Spirit. Remember that in today's text, as Jesus was praying, "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove" (v. 21b-22a). This is more than just a one off anointing designed to make Jesus' baptism more spectacular and memorable. This is the very power of God, filling and animating Jesus, not simply in that moment but throughout his life and ministry.

I like the way that one person has put it when he says, "Jesus, the revelation of God, is the prototype. He is the only one among us who faithfully and perfectly represents what God, the Creator, wished for the human person, created in his image, to be." He goes on to say, "Why is Jesus' earthly life and ministry so important? Because it was a life lived in the way human life is supposed to be lived."¹ This way of being fully and truly human, the way that God intends us to be, can happen in your life and my life because of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. When you're united with Christ by faith and animated by the Holy Spirit, the life of the Son starts to take shape in you, and you grow in obedience to the Father's will. The image of God, so distorted and disfigured by sin, gets restored in you.

John of Kronstadt was a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox priest. He served at a time when alcohol abuse was rampant. Sadly, none of the priests ventured out of their churches to help the people. Instead, they waited for the people to come to them. But John carried out his ministry differently. Compelled by love, he went into the streets and sought out those who suffered. People said that he would lift the hungover, foul-smelling people from the gutter, cradle them in his arms, and say to them, "This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God."²

In the name of Jesus Christ, the one who did, and still does, house the fullness of God, we go to serve in a world where basic human dignity is still widely denigrated and disregarded. I realize that it's the middle of January, and that most of us have already taken down our Christmas trees and turned off our twinkling lights. But the fact is, the gospel, the good news that God showed up in human form to rescue us and to restore his image in us, still speaks powerfully in the world. It speaks to all those individuals and groups of people whose worth and preciousness as human beings is denied or disparaged. It speaks to all those who fail to treat their fellow human beings with the kind of respect and regard that's due to all people, whatever their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, education, age, health, or other categories that so often define us.

According to today's text, what most defines each and every one of us is that we're beloved by God. At Jesus' baptism, God says to him, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (v. 22b). Jesus' relationship to the Father is the core of his identity and the foundation of his life and ministry. And when you're joined to Jesus by faith, who you are and what you're all about are likewise determined by your relationship with the Father. It's the mercy and love of the Father that give you your dignity and absolute worth. Your infinite value comes not primarily from what you've done but by what Jesus has done for you by identifying himself with us, reconciling us back to God, and restoring our communion with God.

As he was growing up in his father's congregation, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr. learned about the idea of "somebodyness." "Somebodyness" was grounded in the conviction that a personal God had created each of us in his image, thereby enabling you to reject negative images that the culture might impose on you. Your "somebodyness," your value, came not from what you did but from who you were in the eyes of God. In the context of a system of segregation, King once wrote, "We must have the spiritual audacity to assert our somebodyness. . . ." He went on to say, "He who feels that he is somebody, even though humiliated by external servitude, achieves a sense of selfhood and dignity that nothing in all the world can take away."³ At Ebenezer Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, and all the people of the congregation, grew in their belief that God had given them a "somebodyness," a sense of self-worth that, as one person has put it, "had been signed and sealed by Jesus' death and resurrection."⁴

What was sealed at Jesus' death and resurrection had already gotten underway at his baptism. Luke says, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." He was there with us and for us, taking on our humanity, revealing our worth, and showing us what we, through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, can become.

¹ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "The Human Prototype." *Christianity Today* (January 2012) 30.

² James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2009) 162.

³ *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Volume V: Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959-December 1960*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley: University of California, 2005) 284.

⁴ James Cone, quoted in, James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 85.