

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 12, 2025

SERMON:

AND THE WORD WAS GOD –

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Before Abraham was, I AM

One of the great bones of doctrinal contention down through the history of Christianity has been about the meaning and function of baptism.

There are denominations who believe in total immersion, some partial immersion, some in sprinkling. Some regard it as appropriate for infants, some think it should wait until the age of confirmation, and some think the only meaningful baptism can be when the person in question is old enough to make an adult, informed decision. Some think it is largely a symbolic ritual, and others that it has some supernatural power. Some think that only people with a certain credential like a priest or an ordained minister can baptize, and others would allow any received Christian that authority.

So, what is a person to think?

As a practical matter, my advice would be: find a Christian church full of people you like and respect who seem to be conducting themselves the way you would like to conduct yourself, and not worry about their doctrine of the particular of baptism, while never neglecting the vital and eternal significance of some visible conferral of grace.

Be that as it may, I think a more interesting question to ask – even if we can't fully answer it either – is what would the baptism that our gospel passage for today narrates have meant to Jesus Himself?

Aside from the nativity stories we find in Matthew and Luke – the stories we've been dwelling on with such pleasure during Advent – the gospel writers don't tell us much about the life of Jesus up until the time His ministry begins. Really the only other event we hear about is the visit to the Temple that Jesus made with his parents when He was about twelve and which we talked about a couple of weeks ago. That was the visit of his parents to Jerusalem where Jesus is shown at the age of twelve of having arrived at an understanding of God as, in the realm of spiritual reality, his true Father, a realization which he urges on all of us:

Why were you having trouble finding me? He asks His parents. Didn't you know I would be about my father's business?

By the time we hear anything more about Jesus, he was about thirty years of age, so around eighteen years had passed. We know nothing of those years, but it seems certain that he must have been realizing more and more His own uniqueness. But He still remained a carpenter in Nazareth, taking care of daily business, dealing with the problems we all deal with, problems of family and community and finances.

And yet he must during those years have become aware of something even more unfathomable about himself, something the prophets of old had intuited but could not yet articulate, something hidden from all eternity until now.

He must have become aware of his own divinity.

And he must have been waiting for the moment when God, following His own eternal counsel, would reveal that awareness to the world.

And then John the Baptist emerged, and people from all over came out of their towns and villages to hear him preaching in the wilderness and be baptized by him in the waters of the Jordan River. And Jesus, having arrived in the privacy of His own life at the realization of who he was, felt the arrival of that moment, and recognized in John's

message and the people's response to it, that the time of God's full revelation had finally arrived.

Let me repeat the key verses from our reading:

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 John answered all of them by saying, "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.

The people wondered whether John himself might be the Messiah. And John answered that he was not, that he was only the forerunner of someone who was yet to come, someone much greater than he himself.

To understand the importance of this, we must say something about this notion of the Messiah.

The idea of the *Messiah* has a long and complicated history within Israel, a history that Bible scholars are still reconstructing to this day. The word itself simply means the Anointed, and it derives from the Jewish practice of anointing someone into a special office by pouring oil on his head. The three offices that required anointing were priest, prophet, and king. The word Messiah as a title or name came to apply only to the king, so when the Jews spoke of the coming Messiah, they were referring to some future king of Israel.

For much of its history, it was meant to refer to some as yet unborn person who would rise up and, with God's blessing and assistance, God's *anointing*, would rise to power over Israel, as David had once done. In fact, most thought that this future person would come from the line of David.

But alongside this idea of the Messiah, there emerged over time another idea, especially in the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. This was the idea of a being who was, in some sense, divine, not merely human. In this way of thinking, the Messiah

would, in some still allusive sense, come down from God to lead Israel, rather than arise up from its people.

This is a vast oversimplification, but suffice it to say that by the time of Jesus, both of these ideas had their adherents. It's always important to remember that the Jews, in their religious thinking, were just as contentious and divided as people are today, perhaps even more so.

But to return to John, what I want to point out to you is that John the Baptist clearly belonged to the camp who regarded the Messiah as a divine or at least semi-divine being. Look again at what he says:

I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Human kings, no matter how powerful, do not baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, whatever exactly that means.

And I would suggest that is why John realizes that he himself could never be the Messiah, even were he to become king. John realized that, whatever powers he had, they did not rise to the level of divinity.

And all this leads up to the thing that really matters.. I suggest to you that Jesus, during all those private years in Nazareth, came to the full realization that He did share the divine nature of God. There are of course mysteries here that we cannot hope to understand this side of heaven, if even there. But I believe that it was with this realization that Jesus walked from Galilee down into Judah, that it was in an awareness of who He Himself was that he waited with the crowds along the shore while John baptized, that it was with full understanding that He was the one John was prophesying about that he walked into the river and knelt in front of John, that it was with conviction of his unique relationship with God that he allowed John to lower him beneath the flowing waters of the Jordan River.

And now hear again what Jesus heard as he came up out of the water:

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

That saying has two parts, and each part is a quotation from the Hebrew scriptures.

Psalms number 2, verse 7 reads: *"The LORD said to me: You are my Son; today I have begotten you."*

While Isaiah writes: *"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon; he will bring forth justice to the nations."* (42: 1)

Put them together, and we read: *You are my Son, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.*

And read again the words Jesus heard on coming out of the water:

"You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Both the second psalm and this portion of Isaiah are about the Messiah, and both picture the Messiah as more than human, as being in a unique relationship with God, as being Himself divine.

That was the realization about Himself that Jesus brought to the Jordan River that day, and that was the affirmation He received from God alone as he came up out of the water that day.

By the time the gospels were being written, forty or fifty years after Jesus walked the earth, there were still many different and conflicting views as to who He was, that he might have been an inspired teacher, even a divinely inspired teacher, that he might have been a human somehow elevated by God, that he might have been a divine spirit somehow disguised as a human being.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke wanted to make it crystal clear in their accounts that He was none of these things, that he was instead the divine Son of God walking the earth as a human being, and so each of them made sure to include this episode, which combines John's awareness of his own humanity and Jesus's awareness of His own divinity.

The Gospel of John, written later, while there was still ongoing contention in the young Christian movement as to who Jesus was, puts it even more clearly in the opening words of his gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, Father, is that you weld us to the truth, that you protect us from the temptation of believing anything less than the truth, that you strengthen our faith in the divinity of your beloved child, our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.