

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness preaching. We met him back in Advent. He reappears now, during Epiphany. That's because John's our first epiphany, our first vivid revelation of who Jesus is.

John's preaching links him with the prophets of old, who spoke fierce words of truth, calling Israel to repent and change its ways. So did he. That's why he's been called the last of the Hebrew prophets.

But John says that though many people come out to the desert to hear his powerful preaching, someone's coming after him who's "mightier" than he. John preaches judgment; the one coming after him will be the judge. John baptizes with water; the one coming after him will baptize with fire.

Jesus steps into the water, humbly submitting to John's baptism. As he does, he prays, showing his submission to God. He's clearly a human being, showing the humility befitting humans before God.

*And yet* when he was baptized something unique happened: the heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my son, the Beloved."

Luke's saying, right at the very beginning of his Gospel, that Jesus is definitely a full human being, and Jesus is also the long-awaited Messiah. He is fully human and fully God.

The first Christians had two things to say about Jesus: he's really a person, clearly a human being, and he's the fullness of God. Right away, they used the most extravagant words to describe him. Later, some scholars may've called him a "great man," or "a fine moral teacher," but none who followed him said that about him.

What they said about Jesus from the first days after his resurrection was that he was God's Son, God's beloved, the world's savior. More, even than an angel, he was God. Jesus, who lived briefly, died horribly, and rose unexpectedly, was one with God. God does what Jesus does. God is who Jesus says God is. Jesus isn't just a messenger of God. He's who we said he was on Christmas: Emmanuel, God with us!

The idea that after he was crucified, his followers feelings got the best of them, and their grief tricked them into believing that he was divine, is absurd. You just can't get from there (Jesus as a great moral teacher, a deeply spiritual person, or some other exalted human attribute) to here (the church spread across every nation and race, people ready to die to be faithful to him).

The only plausible explanation for the martyrs, the church, the Gospels, and our being gathered here 2000 years later is that Jesus was indeed a great moral teacher, a deeply spiritual person, and the Son of God, the Beloved, the Messiah in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, God not holding anything back. There's no lack of the man Jesus in God and no lack of God in the man Jesus.

Luke says "the people were filled with expectation" wondering if John was the Messiah. Soon, Jesus will cause problems for lots of people because in him, they'll get a redefinition of Messiah, and thus a redefinition of God and a redefinition of humanity. Later, when he stoops and washes his disciples' feet (before he dies for them and the world), he redefines God; God's not just power and glory but service and suffering weakness.

So, when people ask, "How can you believe in God with so much suffering in the world?" they're working with a limited idea of "God" - God as a "supreme being," always in control, unlimited in

power, rather than the God who was in Jesus reconciling the world through service, suffering, sacrifice, and love. That not a very appealing message in a culture that worships, not Jesus, but self-sufficiency and power. But that's what scripture says!

As a Christian it's hard to have someone say, "I don't believe in God!" The best response may be, "Who's the God you don't believe in? I bet we Christians also don't believe in that God, either. We believe in the God Jesus showed us. Take a look at Jesus and see if you can't believe in that God!"

Luke says that the one who stands in the muddy Jordan, being baptized by John, is none other than the Son of God, the beloved. And if you believe that, then you'll have some rather odd views of God.

Because, beginning there in the water Jesus redefined both "humanity" and "divinity" so we could never again think "human being" or "God" without thinking of him. Nor say humanity's without hope after God became present to us in him. Nor say that God's distant and threatening after God was revealed to be who Jesus is.

Luke offers no explanation of Jesus' divinity/humanity. He simply testifies to what all who followed Jesus eventually knew – Jesus was fully God and fully human. God was "in Christ." To see Jesus is to see God.

Sorry, if you prefer God to be with you as a great moral teacher or wise sage. Because when Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended, and a divine voice declared who he was – "My Son, the beloved." In him, divinity and humanity met. A domesticated Jesus, whose strange divine/human mix has been made simpler – either divine or human – a Jesus who's easier to handle, is no Jesus at all. We need God to be God incarnate, close to us, not a simpler God we thought up ourselves. The rationally impossible just happens to be true: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself!

Sorry, if you prefer your God totally spiritual: inflated, pale and fuzzy vagueness sealed off from real life. Because when Jesus was baptized, he made God real, present, visible, showed us who God is. But in standing there in solidarity with all of us sinners, submitting to baptism, he also made our sin and need to repent of it undeniable, and showed us what we need to do - submit to baptism and to God, humble ourselves, get down off of our mini-thrones from which we try to rule our lives and the world around us, so that we can be brought back to God and right relationship with others. In Jesus, divinity embraced humanity, so we could all be embraced by God, and truly embrace one another.

It's challenging to think about God with all the complexity that God's present to us in Jesus, fully human and fully divine. People ask, "Can I really trust the Bible? It's a thoroughly human product, full of the errors and contradictions that characterize any human endeavor." The implication is that if scripture has any human taint, shows any creaturely weakness, it can't be trusted to talk about God.

But what if we don't know anything for sure about God except what we see in the God/human Jesus? What if Jesus really is fully human and fully divine? Then how else would we hope to find out about God except through a human medium? God came to us as we are, met us where we live – in the human words of scripture that become the voice of God, in the man Jesus who becomes the presence of God.

And so Jesus' baptism is an Epiphany. God's not exactly the God we presumed God to be – God's whoever speaks in behalf of, and who is fully represented to us in Jesus. And we're not exactly the lost, forlorn, irredeemably sinful ones some of us think we are, nor the unflawed, ever progressing, incapable of sin or evil ones, others of us think we are – God comes to us, to show us who we're called to be and how we've fallen short in Jesus, and all we can be through him. Always standing with us, speaking to us, reaching for us, holding nothing back, in his Son, the Beloved.

So, in our first glimpse of Jesus, nothing's held back. We're told all we need to know about him. The curtain's pulled back; his full identity is shown. The mystery at the heart of our faith is exposed, so that we, today, might adore and worship the one of whom the voice from heaven said, "this is my Son, the Beloved," and he might become our beloved, too. May we always live with and toward that hope. Amen.

Lord Jesus,

You come to us as one unknown.

All of our expectations for who God is are being overturned by your appearance among us.

All our images of humanity are also being overturned by you.

Give us the grace, to receive you in your Incarnation, to submit our ideas of God to your definition, ...to never construct a faith or deny one based on our own idea of who God is,

...but always on the basis of who you show us God to be.

Give us the courage to receive you, to have our definitions of humanity and divinity rearranged.

Reveal yourself to us as you are rather than as we would have you to be.

Loving God,

We fear the chaos of current events, the rapid-fire assault of a never-ending news cycle

...in which something is always happening without the filter of your timeless word.

Help us hear your word to us, "Do not fear, for I am with you."

We are inundated by the fads and fashions, always calling into question the timeless values of love, ...acceptance, tolerance, and the fruits of the Spirit.

Help us hear your word to us, "Do not fear, for I am with you."

Empowering Holy Spirit,

Fill us with courage, so we may resist the tides and currents that swirl all around us,

...enduring and triumphing, living in the world while remaining separate, not of it,

...witnessing to the good news, accepting and loving all who answer your call.

We pray, also, for those known to us with special needs.

We pray in your Holy Name and for your glory.