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Luke 3:21–38

5th Message

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# THE ONLY VOICE THAT MATTERS

*SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE*

The question I would like to ask you this morning is, “Who are you? Do you really know who you are? If you think you do, who told you? Whose voice made the difference and set you free to be who you are?” On the other hand, are there voices you’ve spent your life trying to overcome so that you’re still not sure who you really are?

What does a healthy identity look like? When we look at the life of Jesus we see that life begins with love and acceptance from God, who knows us intimately and calls us each by name. As we embrace our identity as his beloved and feed ourselves with God’s word, our identity is nurtured and grows stronger, and we catch a glimpse of our significance to God and his kingdom. Significance comes from being part of something bigger than ourselves; it comes from stepping into the role we have to play in the world that is God-ordained, that he has prepared uniquely for us. Our grounding in God’s love and acceptance, fueled by our growing sense of significance, leads us to step out into the world in faith and “achieve” – what the Bible calls “bearing fruit.” This is the process of developing and sustaining a healthy identity.

Unfortunately, in the Silicon Valley we have it all wrong. We foolishly start with achievement and to try to work our way into acceptance. We raise our children to compete and win, pressuring them to be the best at everything, regardless of their God-given talents and unique personality traits, and all the while we rob our children of their chance to develop a healthy identity in Christ. We drive them to achieve at all costs and when they manage to succeed despite the odds, the success fuels their sense of significance and drives them to keep striving, to keep succeeding at all costs in order to feel significant and be accepted. They hope someone, someday, will give them the applause they crave that will tell them they are valuable, but it never comes and even if it does, it is never enough. It is an insidious, destructive cycle that never ends.

This destructive cycle of forming an unhealthy identity is made even worse when children grow up in an environment characterized by abuse or abandonment.

Miroslav Volf writes,

The greater the wrong suffered, the more it gets ingrained in the identity of the person who endured it...When wrongdoing defines us, we take on ‘distorted identities, frozen in time and closed to growth’...in less severe cases, the wrongdoing may not define us fully, yet it lodges in our core self and casts a dark shadow on everything we think and do.<sup>1</sup>

Today, as Luke introduces us to Jesus at his baptism we will discover the secret to a new identity, “not humanly acquired but divinely bestowed, even in the midst of our ruin.” Though those old voices may at times drown it out, “behind the unbearable noise of wrongdoing suffered, we can hear in faith the divinely composed music of our true identity.”<sup>2</sup>

Having completed his account of John’s ministry as the forerunner to the Messiah, Luke removes him from the stage to introduce us to Jesus and his preparation for public ministry. The central focus of his preparation will be his identity as God’s Son. This is confirmed by the divine voice from heaven and then securely anchored on earth through Luke’s genealogy, which traces his lineage from Joseph to David, to show that Jesus’ connection to David, that he has a legal right to the throne. To Abraham, that he is fulfillment of the promises to Israel, and to Adam, as the second Adam, his work will embrace the entire human race. The King of Israel is also the head of the human race. He is one of us. “The global scope of God’s purposes is also in the background as Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptized by John.”<sup>3</sup>

## A New Exodus

**Now when all the people were baptized,  
and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,  
the heavens were opened,  
and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a  
dove;  
and a voice came from heaven,  
“You are my beloved Son;  
with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:21-22)**

As Luke gives us our first look at Jesus, he appears to be just one of many in the crowd who stood in line to be baptized by John, a baptism which Luke tells us was for the forgiveness of sin. Why would someone who was without sin be baptized for the forgiveness of sins? To alleviate the tension Matthew added the dialogue between Jesus and John (Matt 3:14-15):

**John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.**

But Luke, following Mark’s example, is not bothered by the tension. With no apology he places Jesus right in the midst of the crowds alongside tax collectors and soldiers who have come to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

If we step back and examine Jesus’ baptism within the context of the gospel and as a story within the larger story of God’s salvation history, the answer may become clear. Jesus is awaiting the new exodus that the prophets predicted would end Israel’s exile and launch the Messianic age on earth (Isa 43:1-7). In the first Exodus all Israel had to pass through the waters of the Red Sea to be part of God’s new community. So now in this new Exodus, all who seek to belong to the renewed Israel must likewise pass through these baptismal waters. So Jesus casts his lot with John’s ministry and descends into the muddy waters of the Jordan. He believes that this was indeed the time – the climax of Israel’s history was upon them.

## The Setting: Prayer

Instead of focusing on the baptism, Luke rushes us forward to observe the amazing things that happened while Jesus was praying *after* he was baptized. Prayer often provides the context for special moments of “revelation and commission or empowerment” in Luke-Acts.<sup>4</sup> We’ve already seen that Gabriel’s visitation to Zechariah occurred not only in the context of Israel’s daily prayer service, but also as direct answer to a distraught husband’s prayers for his barren wife, Elizabeth. And when Jesus was dedicated at the temple, he is blessed and prophesied over by the elderly Simeon and Anna, whose lives were saturated in prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom. Thus it shouldn’t surprise us that veil that separates heaven from earth is suddenly opened as an answer to Jesus’ prayers.

If you wonder what Jesus was praying, the prophet Isaiah may give us a clue. In chapter 64, Isaiah gives voice to the prayer of exiles who were longing for God to display his power like he did at Israel’s first Exodus:

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,  
that the mountains might quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
and that the nations might tremble at your presence!  
When you did awesome things that we did not look for,  
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.  
Isaiah 64:1-3

## The Heavens Open

In response to Jesus’ prayer “the heavens opened,” the “Holy Spirit descended,” and “a voice came.” Not often in Israel’s history was the veil of heaven rent so that an individual could perceive heavenly realities impinging on their everyday lives. Fewer still were privileged enough to hear that wondrous voice that resounds like “the roar of rushing waters” (Ezek 1:24; 43:2). How privileged are we to be given a front row seat to witness the humble setting of the desert dust and muddy waters of Jordan suddenly transformed into a royal coronation ceremony of cosmic proportions.

John disappears from view and for a brief moment in time we are able to behold the three persons of the Trinity in their respective roles at this decisive moment of salvation history. The son is praying, the Spirit descends and a voice speaks. This cameo appearance of all three persons of the Trinity unlocks the secret of what it means to be fully human.

## The Spirit Descends

To know who you are and what you are made to be, you must first come to know who Jesus is. Jesus is the Lord’s anointed one, set apart to serve God’s redemptive purposes for Israel and the world. When Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the midst of his brothers, “the Spirit of the Lord *rushed* upon David from that day onward” (1 Sam 16:13). The verb “rushed” (*salah*) has the concrete meaning “to penetrate,” coupled with the figurative sense of “to succeed.” God’s Spirit gave David surpassing skill in playing the lyre, in warfare and in speech such that even the demon possessed Saul with all his military might was no match for the Spirit-king.

In the case of Jesus, the symbol of anointing of oil is superseded by the reality of the endowment of the Spirit. Luke’s descriptive “in bodily form” emphasizes the completeness of the gift and the concrete

nature of the experience. This was not some ephemeral apparition of divine aura, but a complete infusion of God’s Spirit into human flesh, just as when God, in the creation of the first human being, “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:7). As Isaiah prophesied,

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.  
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (Isa 11:1-2)

The image of the dove harkens back to Genesis 1:2, when the Spirit was brooding over the watery chaos like a bird (or a dove), awaiting the divine utterance of God’s word to begin the creation of the cosmos. Now it broods over the one who will have it in full measure and dispense it to all who believe, giving birth to the new creation (2 Cor 5:17). The dove could also be an allusion to the days of Noah, when the dove returned to the ark with an olive leaf, a sign to Noah that he was about to be rescued from the floodwaters unto a new beginning. So too, this long awaited Messiah will, by the Spirit, rescue us from even deeper floodwaters of sin and death.

The gift of the Spirit is a dominant presence in Luke-Acts, mentioned almost 100 times, and plays a decisive role in reconstituting the people of God and empowering them to live supernatural and godly lives. Right at the outset of our baptism, God has given us everything we need to be his image bearers.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. (2 Pet 1:3-4)

## The Fathers Voice

After the divine anointing by the Holy Spirit, the Father’s voice resounds from heaven, “**You are my Son, my beloved, with you I am well-pleased.**” It is the only voice we hear in the text, and it is the only one that matters, “providing unimpeachable sanction of Jesus with regard to his identity and mission.”<sup>5</sup> In a mere ten words (in Greek) the Father clarifies Jesus’ identity, his mission and his destiny. On a secondary level it unveils the broad outline of the gospel story and by extension, it becomes a road map for our lives.

## The First Secret: Jesus is King

The Father’s words are a compilation of two significant Hebrew texts, with a possible allusion to a third. “You are my son” is a direct quote from Psalm 2, which was the coronation song for kings in Israel.

I will tell of the decree:  
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.  
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” (Ps 2:7-9)

In the third stanza of the Psalm we hear the voice of the king recounting the promise God made to David to establish an eternal

kingdom through his sons. God promised David that each one would be adopted into a father-son relationship. “I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam 7:12-13). From the time of the monarchy the term “son of God” became synonymous for messiah, God’s representative king. Since the days of Israel’s exile David’s throne had been empty. But now the king has finally arrived and is crowned by his Father in the wilderness Jordan, confirming the words of the angel Gabriel to Mary:

**“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:32-33)**

The Father’s voice unveils the first secret of the kingdom – Jesus is the king, not Augustus, Herod or anyone else. It will take almost nine chapters in Luke for the disciples to apprehend this secret, which is finally voiced by Peter in 9:20. “[You are] the Christ of God.” But knowing Jesus’ identity is only half the story. What is the significance behind “the anointed One?” And what will destiny entail? How will Israel’s King establish his rule over the whole earth?

### The Second Secret: The King Must Die

The answer is found in the second half of the Father’s pronouncement – “in whom I am well pleased,” is a quote from Isaiah 42:1:

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

Isaiah 42:1 introduces us to the first of four songs about an anonymous individual who takes on Israel’s role as God’s servant and will do for the nation and world what Israel failed to do. The servant’s life and ministry are poetically displayed in four songs (Isaiah 42:1-13; 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12), each building in exquisite beauty and intensity. The servant’s task will be to bring justice to the world, but strangely he will do it not by coercion or force, but by taking all the world’s pain, sorrow and guilt upon himself. He will be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. And though he will be crushed and buried, God will vindicate him – he shall see his offspring and be high, lifted up and exalted.

With these words the Father unveils the second secret of the kingdom of God. Jesus is king and his kingdom will indeed have no end. However, his earthly destiny is to suffer and die. Never before had these two themes of a royal king and suffering servant been put together like this.

To drive the point home the Father’s voice breaks into the text for a second time on the Mount of Transfiguration saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” (Luke 9:35). The Father’s words convey the same message using the same texts (Psalm 2; Isaiah 42:1), but now with special emphasis on the absolute necessity to pay careful attention to what Jesus will teach them, for the “way” of the kingdom will not be easy to comprehend.

Jesus’ teachings about discipleship will go against everyone’s expectations of the kingdom. The disciples will have to throw away everything they’ve been taught and start fresh, walking alongside Jesus in a brand new way.

### Our Inalienable Identity: Beloved

If you’ve been listening carefully, you’ll notice I left out two words that bind these two texts together – “You are my Son, *the beloved*, with you I am well-pleased.”

The term is laden with emotion. It evokes the painful memory of Abraham on the occasion when God commanded him:

**“Please take your son, your only son, the one you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you” (Gen 22:2).**

The fourfold description of Isaac is dense with emotion. The rabbi Rashi beautifully captures the resonance of Abraham’s inner dialogue as he contemplates each term:

*“Your son.* He said to Him, ‘I have two sons.’ He said to him, *‘Your only one.’* He said, ‘This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.’ He said to him, *‘Whom you love.’* He said to him, “I love both of them.” He said to him, ‘Isaac.’”<sup>6</sup>

In its original context “the one you love” strikes horror in a father’s heart. The burnt offering normally consisted of a sheep or a bull. After it was cut into pieces it was placed on an altar to be consumed by fire. The Hebrew term *‘olah* comes from the verb “to ascend,” signifying the whole sacrifice is consumed by fire and thus “goes up” in smoke. It was an apt symbol to express one’s complete dependence on God. But placing those two terms together, “the one you love” and *‘olah*, is beyond comprehension. It is the unspeakable sacrifice. Once given there will be nothing left. Thus we can appreciate the horror descending on Abraham as he tries to come to grips with what complete dependence means. As the poet explains, “In the twinkling of an eye dawn can go dark.”<sup>7</sup>

As the story plays out it highlights a father’s obedience to go against every ounce of human emotion that screams at him, and trust in the faithfulness of God who he cannot see but whom he knows is good. Abraham believes there must be a greater good.

**And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. (Gen 22:6-8)**

Abraham and Isaac, father and son, take the last and steepest part of their journey alone. During this most difficult part, Abraham can no longer keep emotional distance from his son. He places the wood on Isaac’s back, while he carries the more dangerous objects, the torch and the sharp-edged butcher knife. As he straps the wood to Isaac’s back, he must have envisioned the terrible moment when Isaac would place his back upon the wood. With that, Abraham is seized by silence.

As they walk, Isaac breaks the silence with the affectionate, “my father.” The pathos of the dialogue is incomparable. Abraham answers with his characteristic *“Hineni”* (“Behold me”) and answers the son’s affectionate “my father” with the equally endearing “my son.” Then we hear the inquisitive curiosity of the boy who points out the missing ingredient for worship: “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep?”

Once again, Abraham's reply is one of faith wrapped in ambiguity designed to protect a son from things much too heavy to carry. "God will provide for himself." Here Abraham's faith presses to see beyond what he cannot see, into a future that outlives death itself. The answer must have satisfied the son, for the boy inherently trusts his father. They continue the rest of the way up the mountain.

The scene is framed by the phrase, "*So the two of them walked on together.*" The haunting refrain pictures a father and son walking on in silence, united in one purpose, perhaps for the last time, into the awful obedience of God.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. (Gen 22.9-10)

The minute they arrive at their destination Abraham immediately goes about his assigned tasks. His actions are swift and deliberate. He builds the altar, arranges the wood and most poignantly binds his one and only son. You get the sense that during the long hike he was forced to crank up his resolve to such a degree that he even refuses to speak to his son lest he be deterred from this terrible task. One wonders if he was even able to look his son in the eye as he laid him on the altar. Such resolve amazes us, but Isaac's silent submission is equally unbelievable. Here is a vibrant young man so trusting in a father's love, he allows himself to be bound and laid upon an altar with no resistance. The uniqueness of the event is highlighted by the fact that this verb "*bind*" is used only once in Old Testament. The Jews memorialized, it calling this story "The Aqedah" ("*the binding*" of Isaac).

Once the sacrifice is fully prepared Abraham hurriedly grabs the cleaver before his emotions get the best of him. But as he stretched out his hand to perform what would be his last act as Isaac's father, a voice calls out from heaven.

Two thousand years later, that same voice calls out "beloved." Now you know what it means. It is all about the love between a father and a son united in one purpose: to adopt you. That is how loved you are. When you are baptized in that love, the title, *beloved*, lands on you and like Jesus you are called "son" – a word that does not point to gender but inheritance. You are called to reign with him in a bigger sphere, to represent him wherever you go. And with you he is well pleased; he is going to put his will together with your will and your greatest love in life is going to be offering love to others through your pain and brokenness. There is no greater love than this.

As elders we took this past month to pray and ask God, "What is our calling? What are you calling us as a church to be?" And we came up with two main ideas, one of which is *vitality* – make space in your life to encounter Jesus — not to know about him but to experience him and his love. I've experienced this several times in my life and each time it changed me so profoundly that there was no going back to who I was before. As elders, we aren't interested in you having a lot of facts about Jesus. What good will all those facts do you if you don't know the love of Christ in your heart, if that love doesn't light a fire in your soul to bear His image in the world?

We want you to hear his voice say to you, "You are my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." It is the only voice that matters.

*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:15-17)*

1. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 79.
2. Volf, *The End of Memory*, 80.
3. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 40.
4. See Luke 1:19-20; 2:37-38; Acts 4:23-31; 9:10-19; 13:1-3; 22:7-21. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 185.
5. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 187.
6. Robert Alter, *Genesis Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton & Company, 1996), 103.
7. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 34.

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