

January 10, 2010 Luke 3:13-15, 21-22

How do you know God loves you? Many people reason, "Of course I know God loves me! Look at all the things He has done for me. He gives me my health, my food, my clothing, my home, my family. All these things make me happy and let me know God loves me."

But one day we'll lose all these things. Tragedy, illness, disappointment, and finally death strike every human and every family circle. And when they do, should we assume God no longer loves us? Should we turn away from Him, either in anger or despair? The apostle James reminds us that our life is "a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (James 4:14). And because our life is so brief, we long for God to love us enough to save us from death and give us eternal life. Our reading today demonstrates another Epiphany, a making known of Jesus, and we learn God loves us enough to send His Son. **Jesus is the Only Savior!**

The people in the Judean desert wondered whether John the Baptist might possibly be the Messiah. He preached with such authority. So many were going out to hear him, and his message resonated in their hearts. As tempting as it might have been to accept the people's admiration – and perhaps build his own little cult with all his fawning admirers, John pointed out that One more powerful than he would come. In fact, the coming One, the true Savior, is far greater than any human preacher, so great that John wasn't even worthy to untie his sandals.

The true Messiah, John further explained, would pour out the Holy Spirit directly, baptizing with the Spirit and with fire. Indeed on the 50th day after Jesus had ascended back into heaven in glory, He gave the Holy Spirit to His first disciples with the sound of a wind and tongues of fire on their heads. The tongues of fire symbolized the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit as He gives faith in the Lord Jesus, and by that faith, purifies from all contamination of sin. The Messiah would also demonstrate His power as Judge of all people. A farmer gathers his grain for storage, and burns up the chaff. So the Messiah can look into people's hearts to separate believers from unbelievers, gathering those who trust in Him to eternal life in heaven; punishing unbelievers with the eternal punishment of hell.

Let's note two things – the crowd's propensity to follow someone popular and a true preacher's goal – to direct people to the one true Savior. How many people today follow false religious leaders simply because they are popular and appeal to their intellect or emotions, their desire for a quick fix to their life's problems, or win them over with charm and flattery? The media made a big splash about Milwaukee's new archbishop installed this week. Should we perhaps look to him as our spiritual head since so many others claim his boss, the pope, is the representative of Christ on earth? How many jump on the bandwagon of popular religious speakers because they receive media attention, write books, go on the lecture tour, lead large congregations, and all the world admires them?

Just because someone is popular and is adored by the masses doesn't make him right – or worth following. John directed his hearers to the Lord Jesus Christ! True preachers know they don't have all the answers, nor can they solve all the problems, nor can they rescue mortal souls from hell. They confess they themselves are poor, sinful human beings. Only God Himself can save us, and true preachers will direct their hearers to Jesus, the one who is true God. He is the only Savior!

Want further proof? When Jesus was baptized, as Luke records, "**heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove**" (Luke 3:22). When they inaugurated Kings, Prophets, and Priests in the Old Testament, they would pour olive oil out on

their heads – an anointing with oil, indicating God from heaven had selected this person to serve as His representative. The Old Testament Hebrew title, Messiah, and the New Testament Greek title, Christ, both mean "anointed One." Isaiah 42 prophesied that the Spirit of God would be poured out on the One God Himself designated as the world's Savior. At Jesus' baptism the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, using the form of a dove so He could be visibly seen. Jesus is the anointed King who would conquer His enemies, sin, death, and hell. He is the Prophet who would reveal God's grace and truth for our salvation. He is the Priest who would give His life on the cross as the sacrifice for our sins.

Then God the Father Himself spoke from heaven. **"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** God the Father has an eternal Son, whom with the Holy Spirit we worship and trust as one God in three persons. The Father was delighted in His work, for He would perfectly accomplish the task of rescuing the human race from sin and death. Did Jesus need baptism to wash away the sins of His youth? No, for Jesus is the holy, sinless Son of God. In His baptism He was identifying Himself as our great Substitute, the one who would stand in the place of all sinners to rescue us from our sin.

Now think how much you need this Savior! How often don't you become disgusted with yourself? "What is wrong with me? I knew better than that. Why did I do that? Why did I say that?" Friends, it's because we are conceived as sinners, and our flesh still clings to us like a dirty, filthy rag, staining even the good things we would want to do. Already in this New Year, despite any resolve to forsake certain pet sins of ours, to overcome our weaknesses, to love God more purely, to control our tempers, to check our tongues, and to love our family and our neighbor as ourselves, we discover to our dismay that we sin now as in the past. But Jesus never sinned. Scripture proclaims, **"God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).** He kept God's Law in our place. Then on the cross He suffered and died under the curse of our sin. He rose from the dead to give us the victory over death and the grave.

At Jesus' baptism we see how much the Lord loves us. **"This Jesus is My Son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased."** With these words God says nothing less than, "Here I give you all my grace, love, and blessing. So that you may never have to doubt my love, I offer you here – not another prophet, not a religious hero or saint as an example for you to imitate, nor a treasure of money or health or prosperity, but my beloved Son." Doubt God's love – never, for He gave us Jesus as the token and pledge of His grace and love to take away all our sin.

Doubt God's love – never, for in His grace He gave you a rebirth in your baptism, uniting you with Jesus by faith. We are now God's children and heirs who will inherit all the joy of heaven that Christ inherited. By our God-given, and God-sustained faith in Jesus, we are counted righteous in God's sight, God's dear children in whom he is well pleased. By the Spirit's power we too will live to fulfill the mission God our Father in heaven has given us.

Whenever you wonder, "Does God really love me," remember this: He sent His only Son, to live, to die, and to rise from the dead that we might live forever. Believe in, worship, and live for Jesus, your only Savior. Amen.