

# The Revealing of Christ that Erases the Separation between God and Humanity

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We are the magical time after Christmas day – a time which seems like it should be a let-down from the height of Christmas. But Tradition of the Church uses exactly this time to show all the magic. Specifically, we are in the season of God showing Jesus to the world – one short, but powerful season of revealing, as if God was doing retail politics and showing up at every little town in Iowa, New Hampshire or South Carolina. And in this season of revealing, God shows what has always been true but now is shown to us in a new, powerful way.

There are three big events in this season of revealing. The first is the naming of Jesus,

when Mary and Joseph give him the name “Jesus” or

Joshua, just as the angel had foretold, and when the

person of this baby becomes invested with the name that

means God will save God’s people. The second big event

of the unveiling is the visit of the Wise Ones from the East

– when the Zoroastrian priests from Persia (now Iran)

come to pay homage to this One whose star had risen in

their non-Hebrew, non-Jewish skies. The third big event in

this season of revealing is the baptism of Jesus in the River

Jordan. Whereas the first event (the naming of Jesus) was

a revelation at the Jewish Temple, the second event (the worship paid by the Wise Ones from

the East) showed that the revelation of Jesus would have an impact far beyond the Jewish



people. And now, with this third event of Jesus' baptism, the revelation is to the thousands of people gathered at the River, about 20 miles east of Jerusalem. People swarmed there in response to John the Baptist's ministry of repentance. They came for a chance to start fresh with God. What they got was to witness the door of heaven opening and linking them forever to the God who once was far away but now would always be near.

The Gospel of Mark tells of it in this way: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (1.9-11).

What happened in this moment undid the terrible division between humanity and God. We may underestimate how much of our faith story wrestles with us feeling separate from God, feeling like the "other" or to use a traditional word, "profane." All of know personally that strange feeling of wondering "has God forgotten about me"? Or, where is God now? But it's another thing entirely to realize that it's not just our personal story that makes us wonder why we sometimes feel separate from God. Our sacred story shows the marks of our wrestling too. Just look at the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden – in one way, it is a response to the question, if we are God's people, why do we die, why do we struggle? Look at the story of Moses' people in slavery in Egypt. This too is a story that wrestles with our separateness from God: if we are God's appointed people, why are we enslaved? Look at the numerous stories of horrible human sin in the Old and New Testaments: the murder of Cain, the rape of Dinah, the slaughter of the non-Hebrew peoples as Moses' people entered the Promised Land, the stoning

of women, the neglect of vulnerable women and children. If we look at human behavior and contrast it with what we believe about God, we see starkly the division between us and God. So the whole of Holy Scripture bears signs of our struggle with this struggle of feeling separate from the God who is the Creator of heaven and earth.

But the course of human history changed with God chosen to open the door of heaven and not be separate from us. This radical decision of God to be with us goes into 3D in the revealing of Jesus to those gathered at the River Jordan for their baptism. In the person of Jesus, God joined heaven to earth and earth to heaven by coming as God in human flesh. As early as the 300s, we see the early Church Fathers and Mothers using these words to understand this mystery: God put on humanity, and humanity put on God [Augustine and others]. Said in another way, God clothed himself with human flesh, and human flesh clothed itself with God. The image is something like our children preparing for the Christmas pageant, choosing their costume to be a shepherd, and then putting it on. They put on that shepherd's costume, and for the duration of the pageant, they are a shepherd. The difference is that, at the end of the pageant, they take off the costume. But God, having once put on the flesh of humanity in the person of Jesus, doesn't stop being God, and doesn't stop being human: the two are forever together, and that togetherness is what stops us from being separate from God. This moment of Jesus baptism brings heaven to earth and earth to heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

We need this message that God chooses *not* to be separate from us because our innate human sense is to feel alien, to feel inadequate to God's greatness, to feel not good enough to

be in God's company. The feeling sometimes gets expressed this way, tongue-in-cheek, "Yes, I know that God loves me, but if God *really* finds out what I'm in like, he'd think again!" That's our humanness showing – our human tendency to project our own feelings on God. This tendency to feel separate from God is well rooted in our Christian spirituality, even into our Hebrew roots. Just listen to Psalm 38, verse 21: "Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me; make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation." At times, it feels the most natural thing in the world to pray prayers like this, what we used to call "arrow prayers", as if to say, I'm not sure I've got any credit with God so that God will listen, but I'll shoot up this arrow anyway and hope it hits the target: "Do not forsake me, O Lord; O my God, do not be far from me (!)"

But the true reality, the reality revealed in Jesus' baptism, is that God is not far from you. The coming of Jesus – the coming of God to clothe himself in humanity and for humanity to be clothed with God – this coming of Jesus erases the separation that had divided us from God. And we see this in the very picture that Mark's gospel gives us: Jesus is in the River; he has been pushed down into the water by John the Baptizer, and now his feet find purchase on the muddy bottom of the river, he pushes himself up from his feet, his head rockets through the water as his mouth reaches for air to breathe, his body is dripping with the water of creation, and, standing there in the River, Jesus and all those people around him hear the voice of God opening the door of heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved." In the person of Jesus, there is no division between the plain things of earth and the grandiosity of heaven. In Jesus, heaven and earth meet, and when we allow ourselves to be met by Jesus, we are not separate

from God. We are always in the presence of Christ because Christ as chosen to be present to us, to companion us. We walk with Christ because he first chose to walk with us.

But something can be real and true without it feeling like it's real and true for us. That's why we have ritual, that's why we have ceremony – to rehearse in our bodies and minds what is real and available for us but which we need to *feel* is real and personal for us, what is authentically our personal experience. And so, we celebrate today with Jake Charles-Roy Eiselen as his family presents him for baptism. We rejoice that Jake's mom and dad – Melanie and Harry – and his godparents want Jake to have this experience as his own personal experience – that there is no separation between him and God but that because of the grace of God in the person of Jesus, Jake is forever companioned by God; that, whatever ups and downs happen in his life, whatever seems to get in the way of feeling loved by God, Jake will know that those obstacles are simply obstacles and not truth, and that the truth is that he is forever sealed by the Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. Thank God, for his great generosity, that God has flung open wide the door between heaven and earth so that we can walk through that door and forever be companioned by God. Amen.