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Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria Virginia
Gospel of Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Jesus's baptism is recorded in all four Gospels. All report the descending of the holy dove upon him. Matthew, Mark and John are similar in that the baptism scene appears to just have the Trinity, including Jesus, and there is John the Baptist. Jesus is at the center of the focus. It is all about him. But the Gospel of Luke, our Gospel today, is different.

'Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In Luke, there is no special ritual just for Jesus. He was in line with all the other people: the rich, the soldiers, the poor, the sinners, the people like you and me. Jesus had been baptized and he was off to the side praying when the holy dove appeared and the voice declared Jesus's true paternity "beloved Son". Now everything changed for Jesus.

Back then, and in many places still, people were expected to behave according to their social class. Not much would have been expected of the son of Joseph the carpenter of Nazareth. People of his class would not have been allowed to speak to groups publically. But God the Father affirmed Jesus's true identity as His son, which is the highest status one can be. In one public declaration of Jesus's true paternity, everything changed. Many were there to witness this affirmation. The word spread. Everything changed for Jesus and everything changed for us.

We all have good and bad inside of us. When someone affirms the good in us, that part of us is strengthened. That part of us becomes who we really are in this world. The words Jesus and the people heard that day changed the world forever, and that means they change us too. Through Jesus, we are all God's beloved children. Our family, friends, parishioners, and, yes, even our enemies, need to hear the affirmation of who they really are and how it changes their lives.

We all have different stories. Many of us had or have difficulties with our earthly parents. I grew up hardly knowing my father and my mother died when I was still young. But somehow I got the message that God loved and cherished me. That he made me for good things. This certainty strengthened me as I grew up and filled me with hope that I was a loved person. It continues to do so today because the only life story that matters is that I'm a beloved child of God. So, I wonder, like Jesus, can we line up with the rich, the soldiers, the poor, the sinners, and all the others with all their stories and affirm in them who they really are? Tell them about how they are loved eternally? Tell them what story really matters? Tell them how this knowledge has changed our lives?

This is what we are called to as a church for what begins in baptism is first lived out by knowing who we truly are: God's beloved. May the holy dove come to us and strengthen us to do this work.