

**Adopted by God**

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Mark 1:1-11

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The Christmas story of Matthew and Luke is very familiar to us. So familiar that in our minds and in the telling we blend things together, sliding Luke's shepherds into Matthew's kings, and giving everyone angels. If we were to try and sort it all out it would become a bit confusing since several things don't quite line up. Our desire to have the Christmas story whole, to tell of love born in a manger for us and the world, is so strong that we overcome all the confusion and find in Christmas God's grace born among us and in us.

The other two of our four gospels, Mark and John, have no Joseph, no Mary, no shepherds, no angels singing hallelujah, no baby in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. These two gospels tell no stories of the baby Jesus whatsoever. They begin with the adult Jesus. And their Christmas meaning, their understanding of God among us and for us is often ignored or lost.

Today I focus on Mark's understanding and vision of how the man Jesus became the messiah Christ. This, for Mark, is how Christmas came to be.

[Read Mark 1:1-11]

For Mark, Christmas begins with John the Baptist preaching forgiveness and washing sins away in the Jordan River. John the Baptist knows that someone will come, someone that will not only forgive the people's failures and wash them clean by the baptism of water, but will also give them power to do good, to love and to be loved by the baptism of the Spirit, a holy fire.

Mark doesn't say if John recognizes Jesus as the one. In fact Mark indicates that Jesus is the only one who sees and hears God on the day of his baptism. What Jesus hears from the voice of God, and we the reader are permitted to overhear, is the legal adoption formula of the time, "This is my son!!!" God, at the moment of Jesus' baptism adopts the adult Jesus as son.

When, in the Palestinian culture, a child is adopted into a family the adopting parent announces that the child is their child, the daughter their daughter, the son their son. And in that announcement the child of adoption is equal to any child of biology. The child of adoption by

the declaration of the father, is completely emotionally and legally the child of the adoptive parent. The adopted child has all the rights, privileges and power of the family. And just as the legal son can speak for the father so also can the adopted son.

When Jesus is adopted by God, it is the same as if he were the birth son of God. Jesus can now speak for the father; can use God's wealth and God's power as his own. By adoption, Jesus is God's presence in the world.

I like Mark's Christmas story. In it is hope for me. My birth was fairly ordinary and certainly not miraculous. I was born of a good woman and man, but it was not a virgin birth. Surely there were angels present, but they didn't sing so anyone noticed. And though there were some gifts, they were not gifts for a king. If I am to be God's child, it will not be because of the circumstances of my birth. Something else must happen.

And it is also clear to me that if I am to be God's child it will not be because of my extraordinary goodness. I am not pure, clean and without blemish. I have soiled my life at several points and several times and sadly continue to do so from time to time. I have failed love sometimes because I made poor choices, sometimes because of my ignorance, and sometimes because there were no good choices to make. I do not do miracles of healing. I do not see the future and I am not possessed of uncommon wisdom. I have no connection with God that is any greater than the next person's. The powers of *my* words are just the power of words.

I don't say all this from a sense of self despair, I mostly like me. But I say it because I am aware of most of my failings and I know that I shall not be the child of God because I have earned it.

I will only be God's child, the one in whom God is well pleased, because God chooses to adopt me. I will only be love made flesh because God has chosen to make and share grace in me; to make my small life of some use. And mercifully, lovingly, God chooses to adopt me, to call me son, to offer me the resources, rights, privileges and power of the family. The chance to be loved and to love is given to me, even me, born in commonness and alive in vulgarity.

And if there is hope for me in grace that forgives and

empowers, then there is certainly hope for others. The birth of others is of a like to mine. And the lives of others are often better than mine.

God who sees each of us, who has made us and sustains us, who cares for every hair on our head, has adopted us. We are declared by the voice and spirit of God to be the beloved daughter and the beloved son. Ours is the inheritance of God's reign. Ours is the power to do good, to make justice, to love the wounded to wholeness, and the whole to perfection. We are God's children, not by birth and not by holiness, but by grace. God adopts us.

*Teacher Debbie Moon's first-graders were discussing a picture of a family. One little boy in the picture had different color hair than the other family members.*

*One child suggested that he was adopted, and a little girl named Jocelynn Jay said, "I know all about adoptions because I'm adopted."*

*"What does it mean to be adopted?" asked another child.*

*"It means," said Jocelynn, "that you grew in your mother's heart instead of her tummy."<sup>1</sup>*

We, the adopted children of God, are those who grow up not in God's tummy, but in God's heart. We are those who love because we are loved. We are those who offer the simple miracle of grace to each other and our world, not because of miraculous beginnings, or because we are so very good, but because in the love we have known we love.

Patty Hanson writes:

I sit on the rickety auditorium chair with the camcorder on my shoulder and I can feel the tears well up in my eyes. My six-year-old daughter is on stage, calm, self-possessed, centered and singing her heart out. I am nervous, jittery and emotional. I try not to cry.

*"Listen, can you hear the sound, hearts beating all the world around?" she sings.*

Her little round face turns up to the light, a little face so dear and familiar and yet so unlike my own thin features. Her eyes - eyes so different from mine - look out into the audience with total trust. She knows she is loved.

*Up in the valley, out on the plains, everywhere*

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<sup>1</sup> George Dolan, *What It Means to Be Adopted*, from A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul, (Health Communications, Inc., Deerfield, Beach, FL, 1996), 107

*around the world, heartbeats sound the same."*

The face of her birth mother looks out at me from the stage. The eyes of a young woman that once looked into mine with trust now gaze into the audience. These features my daughter inherited from her birth mother - eyes that tilt up at the corners, and rosy, plump little cheeks that I can't stop kissing.

*"Black or white, red or tan, it's the heart of the family of man ... oh, oh beating away, oh, oh beating away,"* she finishes.

The audience goes wild. I do, too. Thunderous applause fills the room. We rise as one to let Melanie know we loved it. She smiles; she already knew. Now I am crying. I feel so blessed to be her mom. She fills me with so much joy that my heart actually hurts.

The heart of the family of man...the heart of courage that shows us the path to take when we are lost...the heart that makes strangers one with each other for a common purpose: this is the heart Melanie's birth mother showed to me. From deep inside the safest part of herself, Melanie heard her birth mother. This heart of courage belonged to a 16-year-old girl, a girl who became a woman because of her commitment to unconditional love. She was a woman who embraced the concept that she could give her child something no one else ever could" a better life than she had.

Melanie's heart beats close to mine as I hold her and tell her how great she performed. She wiggles in my arms and looks up at me. "Why are you crying, Mommy?"

I answer her, "Because I am so happy for you and you did so well, all by yourself!" I can feel myself reach out and hold her with more than just my arms. I hold her with love for not only myself, but for the beautiful and courageous woman who chose to give birth to my daughter, and then chose again to give her to me. I carry the love from both of us...the birth mother with the courage to share, and the woman whose empty arms were filled with love...*for the heartbeat that we share is one.*<sup>2</sup>

We are the adopted ones who grow in the heart of God.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* 104-5

We are the ones of whom God says, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." Shalom and Amen.