

“By His Baptism You Are Called Beloved” based on Luke 3:21-22 and Isaiah 43:1-3a
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 12, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Dennis Quail is a mild-mannered regular office worker who dreamed of going to Mars, and so, he goes to a company promising to make him believe that he has already been there. What he didn't know was that his real memories had been erased, and that he actually had been a secret agent who went to Mars. Dennis Quail is the main character of a short story called, “We Can Remember it for You Wholesale” by Philip K. Dick, one of my all-time favorite fiction writers.

Then there is Douglas Quaid, who is an enormous construction worker, who is having recurring dreams about Mars and a mysterious woman. He too goes to a company asking for false memories to be implanted in him. He desires to remember himself as a secret agent who had been to Mars. But midway through, he wakes up because this memory is there. It is a real one that was previously believed to have been erased. Douglas Quaid was played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, in the movie “Total Recall,” which is based on Philip K. Dick's short story.

This is not the only movie directly based on or inspired by the writing of Philip K. Dick. Blade Runner may be the most famous, which comes from his novel, “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” It is about Artificial Intelligence Androids. And then there is Minority Report, Paycheck, A Scanner Darkly, the Adjustment Bureau and quite a few more. I've seen all of the ones I just mentioned. In fact, when “A Scanner Darkly” was announced, I could not wait for the movie. But I have still not seen Total Recall. I have refused to watch it.

For me, one of the things I love about Philip K. Dick's writing is how relatable his main characters are, which is because they are usually based on himself. He was a pretty average guy. Dennis Quail is an average guy, who gets thrown into an extraordinary situation, and even though he had apparently been a secret agent before there is nothing about him that would make you think it's true. Douglas Quaid, played by a former Mr. Universe, seems like an invincible killing machine who is not convincing as an average construction worker.

My point is that when I got into Philip K. Dick's writing and knew the real Dennis Quail, I couldn't go back and watch a movie about an unrealistic Douglas Quaid. If I'd had been older when the movie came out, I might have seen it before I read the short story, because I didn't read Philip K. Dick until college. But I was 12 when Total Recall came out and it was not something my family had any interest in. So, for me, the movie was spoiled, when its protagonist seemed unrelatable.

I think most of us, if not all of us, generally like something more when we can relate to it. If you were around in the year 2000, you may remember the question: “Which presidential candidate would you rather have a beer with?” It's actually irrelevant to the job of president, but relevant to our lives. We connect with people who are relatable. I have a hard time relating to Arnold.

This is a challenge in the way our faith is often presented in the world today. Some, want to overemphasize the divine authority of God in Jesus and our own inferiority, while others want to emphasize Jesus's humanity and our potential to be like him. It is true that God has authority, and that we are inferior to God, but this is not the whole truth of the gospel. It leaves out a lot. It points to why Jesus was qualified for the job he had, but it makes him irrelevant to us, in our lives.

Likewise, it is true that Jesus is fully human, and he shows us our potential – what it means to be truly human. Yes, we are called to be like him, but this too, is not the whole truth. It leaves a lot out of the gospel message. He becomes relevant to us, but no more qualified than us. If he earned his status, what keeps us from earning our way into divinity and becoming the next “Jesus”?

This is why it matters that our Christian heritage has always emphasized getting the identity of Jesus right. This is why so much time is spent recognizing who he is as the eternal Son of God, co-equal and One with the Father, alongside who he is as fully human, born of Mary, subject to every human limit, even death. He is fully God who empties himself for our sake, born in our humanity.

In the baptism of Jesus, we see a human Jesus standing in solidarity with us as humans. Likewise, we see a divine Jesus who has no sin but submits to a baptism for the forgiveness of sin. He is in the water because he stands with us, and he goes to the cross – a place of shame – to die for us, again, doing so in solidarity with us.

In Jesus, God took on our flesh, but not to be a superhero, who wins his own victories, nor is he a demi-god who gains his own honor and glory, fame and wealth, overcoming human limits. No. He enters into the waters to be with us in our suffering and pain. When Jesus uses his powers as God, they are only used to relieve suffering and pain for the people he encounters.

I've emphasized this with you for quite a while now: God did not need to save us, but chose to save us, by entering into our human condition to let sin and death do its worst. He enters into our suffering and pain, for our sake.

You see, when we overemphasize God's authority, we think God had to punish Jesus. No, God entered our humanity and the world tried to eliminate God. Sin and death were used in an attempt to destroy Jesus, who was too much love and justice, grace and truth, for the world to handle. The incarnation is about God joining with us in our struggles, and ultimately, our greatest struggle is the consequences of sin and death. So, he took these on, letting all the sin of the world be concentrated on him on the cross, and by his death he defeated sin. With his resurrection, we see that he likewise conquered death.

Jesus is with you in your struggles and your good times, but not in a distant way. He isn't with you for a moment, only to return to where he is more comfortable. He is not something you can possess and therefore control either. He doesn't just fix a few things in your life and then go back to a corner office in heaven rewarding you and others who earned his respect on the front lines.

Nor, has Jesus come to just claim he is with you, choosing to hold on to his own comforts, while exploiting us. No, Jesus shared in your experiences. He shares in your life right now. He is with you in the moments that are too hard and moments that are joyful. He is there in the moments where you need to repent and turn from sin as the people were doing in the waters with John the Baptist.

He is with you with his arms wide open like on that cross to tell you that you are loved. When we hear God's voice declaring Jesus as beloved, remember that in that moment Jesus shares in your human flesh. When you hear that voice, let it speak to you as well and believe it. You are God's beloved, called by name, and through faith, we share in Christ – his life and his work in this world.

In that way, Jesus's baptism is about you and his being in solidarity with you at the water's edge. Knowing this, I want you to now think about your own baptism for a moment. Your baptism was never really about you – it is about God. Your baptism reveals God's call on your life. The Spirit seals you in God's love, and marks you to share in God's reign and God's work to restore all things.

Jesus relates to us by having shared in our humanity, even its worst parts. We relate to Jesus because he shared in our suffering. When we face challenges, he is with us. When we suffer, we share in his suffering for the sake of the world. You are at the water's edge and I want you to know that the God who created all things knows you by name, calls you beloved. That's the message of Jesus's baptism.

When we come to the water to repent and turn to Jesus, we know that because he is the water with us, we are beloved by Jesus, and we can relate to him. It's not easy to then be like Jesus, especially when others are difficult. It's not easy to relate to others by humbling ourselves just as Jesus humbled himself, but that's what Jesus calls us to do. We are called to know we are loved, and then love and serve both God and one another.

Relate to Jesus. God does not desire to stay distant, but desires to be near you, with you, and be recognized by you. This is because God loves you, calling you beloved, and calling you by name. Amen.