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Luke 3: 1-3, 15-17, 21-22

How does a weary world rejoice? We trust our belovedness.

We are in an interesting season of the church year. The season of Christmastide officially ended with Epiphany Sunday last week. We have celebrated the birth of the Christ child. We heard his birth heralded by angels and shepherds, the child born in humility in a manger, yet given royal gifts from magi who travel across the miles. Lent will begin on February 14, Ash Wednesday, and we will begin our journey to the cross. We will hear of Christ's death on a cross, surrounded by common criminals; yet a death did not have the last word.

This short season between Epiphany and Lent is bookended by two Sundays that speak to Jesus' identity: Baptism of the Lord and Transfiguration Sunday. On these Sundays we catch a glimpse of the divine, yet also very human Christ. We begin this morning as we hear the story of Jesus' baptism. Here now these words from Luke chapter 3:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

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." **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Throughout the Advent season, the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus were intertwined. We heard the story of how the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth, although advanced in years, was to give birth to one who would make the way for the Savior who was to follow. We saw this child of Zechariah leap in mother Elizabeth's womb when she opened her arms and home to Mary. This morning the stories of John and Jesus continue to be intertwined as we meet them in adulthood, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist.

When we talk about John the Baptist, we often talk about his dress and food choices. The Gospel of Luke leaves out the details of John's camel hair clothing and diet of locusts and wild honey. While the Gospels of Matthew and Mark share those details, Luke adds the reminder that John is the son of Zechariah, and importantly that the word of God came to John. This is language similar to the call of Old Testament prophets. John's call was to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Amongst those John baptized in today's passage was Jesus. The baptism marked the beginning of Jesus ministry. Luke tells us in the very next verse, verse 23: Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. Following his baptism, he went into the wilderness to fast and pray and then returned to Galilee and began preaching and teaching.

One of the things I find so interesting about the very beginning of Jesus' ministry is that we do not get much detail on how Jesus understood himself or how others saw him. These details will gradually emerge as Jesus' ministry unfolds. What we get are these beautiful words from God the Father, a voice from heaven, declaring "You are my Son, the Beloved." Who then is Jesus Christ at his baptism and the beginning of his ministry? He is the beloved son of God. In addition to the words of connectness, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove.

This morning as part of our worship service we are reaffirming the promises of our own baptism and the baptism of others in the family of faith. Baptism is a way we mark our incorporation into the church – into the one body of Jesus Christ. "Presbyterians describe baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace made by God through Jesus and extended to us. In baptism, God claims us as beloved children and members of Christ's body, the church, washing us clean from sin as we renounce the power of evil and seek the will and way of God."<sup>1</sup>

In the Presbyterian reformed tradition, we baptize only once. As there is one body, there is one baptism. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes all baptisms by other Christian churches that are administered with water and performed in the name of the triune God-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. The baptism of believers witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for our grateful response. The baptism of our young children witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith. Baptism enacts and seals what the word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people.

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<sup>1</sup> David Gambrell. What Presbyterians believe: the sacrament of baptism. *Presbyterian News*. January 21, 2016. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/1/21/what-presbyterians-believe-baptism/>. The following section utilizes material from this article, as well as the W-3.04 Sacrament. *PC(USA) Book of Order 2019-2023*; Westminster John Knox Press, 2019.

The Reformed tradition understands baptism to be a sign of God's covenant. The water of baptism is linked with the waters of creation, the flood, and the exodus. Baptism connects us with God's creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise from generation to generation. Baptism also represents God's call to justice and righteousness, rolling down like a mighty stream.

While we are baptized only once, it is appropriate for us to be reminded of the promises made in baptism. Following this message, we will reaffirm our baptism. Through baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit gives the Church its identity and commissions us for service in the world. This parallels the baptism of Jesus, where the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

You are my beloved. Jesus' call to ministry did not entail a long list of credentials he needed to obtain; no ordination exams to pass; no forms to fill out or training classes. It was the work of the Holy Spirit and the recognition that he was a beloved child of God. I wonder how many times in his life, especially during his three years of ministry, on days when the weariness seeped into his bones, when the crowds were pressing in on him for just one more healing, when the religious leaders and political officials were questioning and reproaching him, criticizing him for welcoming those on the margins of society, eating with those whom polite society says you don't eat with. I wonder how many days Jesus was so weary that he looked back at his baptism in the Jordan River remembering the words from his Father: You are my beloved. You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.

I wonder if these words brought him not just comfort, but reassurance that he was enough. That the Holy Spirit was with him and would guide him. I wonder how many days in our own weariness do we remember the promise of grace we received at our baptism. Do we remember that we are beloved children of the covenant? Do we really, deeply in our bones understand that we are enough? That God's love for us is a gift and not dependent on our achievements.

The waters of baptism can renew us throughout our lives, at times and places when we need God's assurance of love. I think back on times in my own life when the waters of baptism became personal for me.

During my junior year in college, I hit a prayer dry spell. Something that had been so natural became artificial. It was as if I could not remember how to breathe. It took me a good six months before I had the courage to talk to the college chaplain about this. I was embarrassed. I was an Elder in the College Church, preparing to go the PC(USA) General Assembly as a Youth Advisory Delegate. How could I not be able to pray? Rev. Miller, the college chaplain, did what good professors do for students struggling to make sense of the

world. He told me not to worry, gave me a book to read, and checked in on me regularly. When I continued to struggle, Rev. Miller advised me to stop trying so hard. Rather than trying to focus on my normal meditative prayers, he told me to thank God at the end of the day for something that had happened.

And then one night when I least expected it, the wall came tumbling down. I was walking across the campus during an early spring evening. It wasn't supposed to rain, so I had no umbrella. I was lost in thought about the meeting I had just come from and running late for dinner with a friend. God was nowhere in my neural processing. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were hanging out somewhere else that night. Or so I thought. But as gentle as the first misty drops, and as insistent as the steady rain that followed, God reminded me of the personal claim on me. God reassured me that I was already claimed as child of God, reminding me of my baptism and encouraging me not to try so hard. Reminding me that God's nest is so deep, and warm and safe and full of companions on a similar journey.

How does a weary world rejoice? We trust our belovedness. We recognize that we are a beloved child of God and we recognize that our human family are all beloved children of God. Baptism is deeply personal and yet baptism is also deeply communal. The cleansing waters, the new creation are not just for us as individuals, but also for us as community of believers, for the living water can cleanse society of our communal sins, cleanse us of injustice and hypocrisy.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Much of King's work in the area of non-violence and eliminating segregation was rooted in our common "belovedness," rooted in the agape love we share with each other as children of God. King said, "Agape does not begin by discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes...Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community." King felt that justice could not be parceled out to individuals or groups, but was the birthright of every human being in the Beloved Community.<sup>2</sup> King share that "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

A qualitative change in our souls...what if we trust in our belovedness? If we trust in the grace and love promised at our baptism, and if we trust in the grace and love conferred on our siblings in baptism, then we might recognize and work towards King's dream of a beloved community. Trusting in our belovedness, let us join our hearts in prayer...

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes from The Beloved Community section of The King Center website. <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>