

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Trust our Belovedness, Luke 3:21-22
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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Friends, this morning we come to the end of our advent sermon series that we began six weeks ago: “How does a weary world rejoice?” We’ve been answering this question each week by walking through Luke’s gospel and seeing how God might speak to our weary world today. So, we ask one more time, “how does a weary world rejoice?”

This morning also happens to be the day that the global Church celebrates the baptism of Jesus, *Baptism of our Lord* Sunday. It is the day we stop to remember what baptism means. In just a moment we will read Luke’s account of Jesus being baptized by John, but you should know that this one of the few events in the life of Christ that is found in all four gospel accounts: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Though they all frame the baptism narrative in a slightly different way, each of them prioritizes including it. What this tells us as modern readers, is that this baptism is important in the life of Christ, that something special happens here that can help us better know and understand God.

Now remember from a few weeks ago, that when John is born, we’re told that he will prepare the way for the Messiah, by leading the people to repentance and forgiveness. And sure enough, by the time we get to chapter 3, John has grown up and that is precisely what he’s doing. He’s become a popular minister; teaching and preaching and baptizing folks. The crowds call him “John the baptizer” because he’s out in the Jordan river, baptizing anyone and everyone who shows up. We’re told the crowds come from all over; the rich and poor, Jew and gentile, men and women, young and old... all flocking to the river to be reminded that they can be forgiven, that God loves them, and that the promised Messiah is coming to make all things new.

Now, John’s become so popular that some of these crowds begin to wonder if he might be the Messiah that they’ve all been waiting for... but John goes out of his way to make sure everyone understands, explaining to the crowds, “I am baptizing you with water. But one is coming who’s more powerful than I am, the straps of his sandals I’m not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

And so, on one of these days, when John is baptizing folks in the river, we're told that Jesus arrives and asks John to baptize him. Now, John knows that Jesus is the promised Messiah, so in Matthew's gospel, he turns to Jesus and says, "uh, Jesus, you're the Messiah... you don't need to be baptized by me... or have any sins forgiven. Actually, I'm the one who needs to be baptized by you!"

But Jesus is adamant about this. He knows that this moment is about a whole lot more than a baptism; a significant shift is happening here. It is now time for Jesus to begin his public ministry and this baptism will mark that shift. John, who has been preparing the way will now step back, as Jesus definitively steps in. So, no, Jesus doesn't NEED to be baptized... he chooses to be baptized. Jesus is once again showing the world that God has come to fully identify with humanity... that God in Christ has become one of us.

Let's turn to our text this morning. Hear the Word of the Lord from Luke 3:21-22 **"When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."** The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Can you imagine being in the crowd that day... the anticipation of the Messiah coming... Jesus showing up... and then after he's baptized and he begins to pray... suddenly the sky opens, some sort of spiritual dove descends, and the audible voice of God speaks... "You are my beloved son, I'm so proud of you." This is an incredible moment; no wonder each gospel writer made sure to include it.

I wonder, when's the last time you heard those words from someone that mattered. I love you. I'm proud of you.

Jesus' public ministry doesn't begin with a parade, or with fanfare, or with military might... no, the Messiah steps forward to be baptized in the river just like everybody else, to fully identify with what it is to be human, and into that moment, what does God say? "You are my child. You are my beloved. I am so darn pleased by you."

Notice, this message of belovedness is spoken over Jesus before he begins his ministry, before Jesus does a single thing to earn it. God tells Jesus this before he's tempted in the wilderness, before he calls his disciples, before he turns water into wine and calms the storms, before he heals a single person or preaches a single sermon, and before he feeds the masses. God's message of belovedness is spoken over Jesus long before Jesus will be betrayed, rejected, and cry out from the cross. Jesus is loved... just because he is. "You are my beloved child."

And after his baptism, Jesus will spend of the rest of his life and ministry speaking that same message over every single person he encounters. The message that declares that God so loved the world that he sent his son, not to condemn the world, but to save it. The message that says, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The message that promises, that in Christ, we too are the beloved children of God, that we can be forgiven, made new, and returned to who God has made us to be.

This is what we celebrate on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday... that because of God's great love, we have been baptized into Christ. **Jesus became one with us in his baptism and we get to become one with him through ours.** We remember that we belong to God. What this means friends, is that whether or not the sky splits open, or a dove descends, God is still speaking over you and over me: "You are my beloved child." You and I, we are loved, just because we are.

The problem, of course, is that we really struggle to believe this. So often, we doubt God's love for us. Maybe because of something we've done or because of something that happened to us. But I would wager that we all lay in bed from time to time and wonder, could it be true? Could God really love me?

Even more, our belovedness can be hard to hold onto in a world that does its level best to convince us that we are not enough. Whether we get that message on social media, or through mass marketing, or from our peers, or coworkers, or even from our own families... we are bombarded from all directions with messaging that undermines our belovedness.

Henri Nouwen, one of my favorite Christian writers, wrote an entire book on this very subject, called “Life of the Beloved.” This book came about when one of Nouwen’s good friends, an agnostic secular journalist, asked him to try and explain the spiritual life in a simple way, without too much theology or churchy language. So, Nouwen did. In the opening chapter, Nouwen wrote this to his friend, **“All I want to say to you is this, ‘You are the Beloved.’”** He’s really right. That is all that matters.

He goes onto say, **“It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, you are nobody—unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’ These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That’s the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection.”**

I’ve got to tell you... this might be my biggest heartbreak in pastoral ministry. You know, I went into this line of work because I was so incredibly captivated by God’s love. I still am. Coming to understand my own belovedness changed everything for me and I simply felt compelled to somehow help others come to see themselves in the way that God sees them. Because when someone understands—and I mean, like really understands, like down to their toes finally ‘gets’ it—that God isn’t mad at them, but actually delights in them... that changes everything. That transforms us into who God intended we’d be.

But I have to admit, this can be very hard. Because so many folks have been profoundly shaped by painful experiences that have left them questioning their full identity, that leave them feeling less-than, unworthy, and maybe even ultimately unlovable. When they think of God, they can’t imagine hearing “you’re my beloved child, I’m so proud of you.” Rather, they only hear messages of shame and disgust and rejection. The wounds that some folks carry around with them have done lasting damage, leading them to believe the worst about themselves and then they act out of that self-hatred they feel, grasping for anything that might make them feel better, no matter the cost to themselves or to others.

If you’ve ever wondered what’s wrong with the world, why there is so much pain, despair, greed, revenge, abuse and war? This is why. We live in a world filled with the walking wounded. Some of you might describe yourselves that way this morning. And there’s so much truth to the saying that **hurt people hurt people**. We just end up

spreading our pain around. But what if the reverse is also true: **Loved people love people.** People who come to know their belovedness, they can't help but spread that around.

Father Gregory Boyle is one of my favorite humans on the planet. He's a Jesuit priest that runs a gang-intervention program in Los Angeles called Homeboy Industries. They help folks get clean, sober, healthy, and find a good job. He's written 3 books that I cannot recommend highly enough that illustrate how transformative it is when someone, who society has deemed unredeemable, comes to realize that they are worth loving... who has an experience that shatters all their self-hatred and self-rejection and invites them to imagine that God does indeed speak over them, "you are my beloved child. I am so proud of you."

He writes that, **"At Homeboy Industries, we seek to tell each and every person this truth: they are exactly what God had in mind when God made them—and then we watch, from this privileged place, as people begin to inhabit this truth. Nothing is the same again. No bullet can pierce this, no prison walls can keep this out. And death can't touch it—it is just that huge."**

Friends, how does a weary world rejoice? We trust our belovedness. We remember that God loves us, that God delights in us, that the most-true thing about us is that we are beloved children of God. And on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we remember our baptism, the sacrament that marks us as part of this beloved family.

Because here's the most beautiful thing... when we remember this, when we are confident of God's love for us, our best and truest selves rise to the surface. No matter what painful experiences we've been through, no matter what terrible things we may have done, we can step into our forgiveness, we can begin to inhabit the truth that God loves us. And that changes everything. All the hoarding, withholding, and anger begin to subside. All the selfish demands of being first and needing constant recognition begin to fade away. Soon, our belovedness creates room for compassion to take root. The grasping and the striving are no longer needed. And the Holy Spirit empowers us with the ability to extend this free and inexhaustible love to those around us that still might be convinced they're unredeemable. Loved people love people.

Nouwen explains this surprising gift to his curious friend: **“I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness. The blessed one always blesses.”**

But before you worry too much about your ability to love and bless others... let's make sure we don't put the cart before the horse. Friends, the most important thing you can do, the thing that will root your life and determine how you see the world... it all comes down to this. Like Nouwen wrote to his friend, hear this truth this morning. **“All I want to say to you is this, ‘You are the Beloved.’”** That is who you really are. How does a weary world rejoice? We trust our belovedness. We remember our baptism. We trust that we belong to God.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, I want to read this poem by Rev. Sarah Speed, entitled “The Bravest Thing We Can Do.”

Trust your belovedness.

Let it be a protest, an act of resistance, a song of celebration.

Trust your belovedness.

in a world that is rarely satisfied.

Wear it like a badge of honor. Speak it as confidently as your last name. Tattoo it to your heart.

When outside forces chip away at your sense of self,

when life asks you to hand over the keys,

remember the water. Remember creation. Remember how it was *good, so very good.*

Let that truth hum through your veins.

Sing it so loud that it drowns out the weariness of the world,

for the bravest thing we can ever do is trust that we belong here.

Communion: Friends, we now come to the table to celebrate the other sacrament Jesus not only modeled for us but asked his disciples to continue to do... the sacrament of holy communion. This is the table we return to again and again to remember who we really are, to begin again, and ask that God's spirit would empower us to hold onto our beloved identity in a world that would rip it from our hands.

I remind you that this is not the table of any one tradition, or the table of First Presbyterian Church; this is the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. All are welcome here. You are welcome here.

We will come forward in a few moments, down the center aisle in two rows and receive communion by intinction, before proceeding back on the very outside aisles to return to your seat. We will offer you glutton free bread, which you can dip into the cup of juice. If you would prefer to receive a pre-packaged cup and wafer, those too are available from the server on the outside edges. If you are unable to come forward, our servers will happily come to you, please just make an usher aware of this.

Let's pray: God of baptismal waters, there are a million other places we could be right now, but we chose to be here. We *needed* to be here. We needed to hear, once more, that we are created in your image—fiercely loved and delighted in. We needed to hear your words of affirmation because the world is an exhausting place. Over and over again we are surrounded with reminders that we should be doing more, we should be doing better, we should be working harder. The list of "coulds" and "shoulds" is so long that we can lose ourselves in them. But then we come to your sanctuary, and we hear you say that you delight in us. And all of the sudden, things fall into place once again. Loving and claiming God, help us to see ourselves the way you see us. Give us the grace and the tenderness to love ourselves as you love us. Remind us that we are worthy of Sabbath, worthy of grace, worthy of love and belonging. In silence, we lift up the prayers that we carry for ourselves in this moment. May you hear these words and draw near to us, O God.

Pause for a moment of silent prayer.

Gracious God, we are not the only ones who need your care and affirmation. So today we also ask for the wisdom to give compassion to our neighbors—friends and strangers alike. Teach us how to be advocates for others so that all might know that they are a beloved child of God. Today we pray for all in our church family who are suffering in body, mind, or spirit this day. Be with them. Renew their spirits. Remind them, just as

you remind us, that they all are loved by you. And until your promised day when joy outweighs weariness, we will return to the water's edge. We will continue to look for you in our midst, and we will continue to affirm belovedness in one another.

Holy Spirit, we ask now that you take this bread and this juice, ordinary and common elements, and by your power make them extraordinary, that they would bring us into a deeper sense of our belovedness, that this meal would remind us who we really are. Now with united voices, we lift our hearts to you, using the words your son taught us to pray, saying: **Our Father...**

On the night Jesus would be arrested, he was with his disciples whom he loved sharing a meal, and he took bread and after giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying ***"take and eat; this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."***

And in the same way, Jesus took the cup saying, ***"this cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, and poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink this cup in remembrance of me."***

Friends, as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the Lord's death and resurrection until he comes again. These are the gifts of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Come to the table. You who have much faith. And you who would like to have more. You who come here often, and you who have not been here for a long time. You who have tried to follow Jesus and you who have failed. Come. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who invites us here.