

January 9, 2022  
Rev. Kerry Smith

Called by our Baptism  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

New Revised Standard Version

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 thong 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."

I love the story of my baptism. When I was born my grandmother was really struggling with her health. She had diabetes and she said she was determined to live to see if she had a new granddaughter or a new grandson. Very soon after I was born my dad would take me to the hospital room doorway when my grandmother was in the hospital. I can't even imagine how hard it must have been for my mom to have a 4 year old daughter, my sister, and a newborn and her mom was dying. My grandmother passed away when I was five months old and the family traveled from Houston, Texas to Smithton, Pennsylvania so that she could be buried with the rest of her family in her hometown. My grandmother was laid to rest on Holy Saturday and I was baptized on Easter Sunday in the church that had been the home for my mom and her family for many years.

Thinking about my baptism makes me feel loved because I was surrounded by my family in a place that was so special. We were all surrounded by God's love as we grieved and felt God filling our hearts with comfort and peace. And in my baptism my family was proclaiming that they would teach me about Jesus. In my baptism I became a part of something larger than myself. I became a part of the Christian Church, the body of Christ, where I have found support, love, family, community and faith. Throughout my life when there has been tragedy, my church family has always been there. Church is where I have always felt love and comfort. I feel loved in this place.

As I read the story of Jesus' baptism this week, I kept thinking about the word "you". In Luke and Mark's telling of Jesus' baptism, the heavens open, the Holy Spirit comes down like a dove, and a voice from heaven calls out, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In Matthew's Gospel, it is different. It says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I like the word you, it feels intimate. It feels like someone is paying attention, and wants me to pay attention. It feels personal.

Luke's Gospel is personal. There are stories in Luke's Gospel that aren't in any other Gospels, such as the widow of Nain in Luke 7 and Zacchaeus up in a tree in Luke 19. The writer of Luke highlights the people that Jesus sees that no one else does. Examples are the parable of the Good Samaritan, who is never called good in that story but is good because they are willing to come close, see the hurt person, and help. The priest and the Levite don't see the hurt person but the Samaritan comes close, sees, and helps.

When Jesus hears the word "you" at his baptism, he knows that God is paying attention to him. He knows that he is loved. Hearing the word "you" helped him be reminded that he needed to pay attention to others. At baptism we believe that God is baptizing us. The heavens are opening up, the Holy Spirit is coming like a dove, and we are hearing a voice from heaven saying, you are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

We don't do anything to earn that love. I remember I used to feel like I needed to share with God all of my sins, all of the things that I had done wrong before I could take Communion. After all, as humans we are capable of both incredible good and terrifying evil. But, God's love for us isn't a condition of that love. We think we need to act, think, and speak perfectly or just throw in the towel. But, God doesn't work that way. God's forgiveness is a result of God's love for us. We are forgiven because we are God's children. In Baptism God proclaims God's great love for us; we are called, named, and claimed as God's beloved children; we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit;...and then, because of God's love for us, God also promises to forgive, renew, and restore us at all times.<sup>1</sup> In baptism we experience love, identity, affirmation, commitment, and promise.

We get to be baptized and named as God's beloved child just like Jesus is. You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. We are loved, affirmed and given identity as God's precious child. You are not a mistake and guilt and shame is not from God. God created you and you are a beautiful child of God. The hard part is that we are responsible for who we become and how happy we are. We choose our own happiness because we have control over our own life. We may not know where the road ahead leads, but we can take responsibility for our own life and for our own happiness.

Being a child of God trumps everything else. We have divine knowledge that we are loved and worthy and enough just as we are. We are worth it. I love the new year because it is so full of possibilities. We think this is the year that we are going to work out more or eat better or really read the entire Bible. I want to encourage us all to make a promise to ourselves and not break it because we are worth it. It might be a promise that says I am going to start something new or I am going to open myself up to other people.

This is the season of Epiphany when we think about the bright star that the wise men followed. It is a reminder that with his birth, Christ became our light in the darkness of this world. In your life when it feels like you can't see where you are going, may we breath in the promise of baptism, that God has called us by name and we are God's. I was listening to a podcast where the actor and devout Catholic Martin Sheen told Krista Tippett how he felt about standing in line in worship.<sup>2</sup> He said, "How can we understand these great mysteries of the church? I don't have a clue. I just stand in line and say Here I am, I'm with them, the community of faith. This explains the mystery, all the love. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed, just watching people in line. It's the most profound thing. You just surrender yourself to it."

Theologian Paul Tillich Teaches us that grace is accepting the fact that we are accepted, despite the fact that we are unacceptable. God is love. That means God loves us. Our part is to be aware enough to feel it. God is always there and always will be there for all of us because God's grace and love is available to all. In the Methodist tradition we say that is God's prevenient grace, a grace that goes before us. Our loving God is constantly reaching out, wanting to be at the center of our lives. And although we might still have questions, we are directed to Jesus. At some point, each of us usually craves more — a deeper understanding of life and our purpose in it. Sometimes we feel God calling, and we feel a deep need to respond. It is different for each of us. For some, there is a distinct moment that we can recall and point to. For others, it might be a series of moments over time, drawing us closer and closer to God. Baptism is a moment when we clearly see a gift held in outstretched loving arms, and we say yes. Through this gift, we find

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/the-baptism-of-our-lord-c-forgiveness-and-so-much-more/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/martin-sheen-spirituality-of-imagination-jun2017/>

newness of life, union with Christ, God's Spirit filling our lives, and true belonging to Christ's community.

Baptism is a moment when we hear for the first time a small voice of God saying, "I love you. You are my son. You are my daughter. I will love you forever." From that moment on, we are forever changed, placed on a path following Jesus. In his wonderful book, "Life of the Beloved" Henry Nouwen shares his understanding of what God thinks of me, and of all of us, "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. you know me as your own and I know you as my own...Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."

We might need to sit with that for a bit. God, help us believe it. Jesus, we believe, help our unbelief. We are beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children, and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. God calls us by name and says we are God's. Precious and honored in God's sight. Now it is up to us to claim our own identity as God's beloved children.

I want to invite you to turn to someone sitting next to you, look at them, and offer them the words from Isaiah 43, "You are precious in God's sight." As we hear those words may we believe them in our hearts. I want to invite everyone to come and touch the waters of baptism as you hear the words, "Remember that you are baptized and rejoice!". You might touch the water and make the sign of the cross on your own forehead. You might have never been baptized before, and I want to invite you to come forward and experience God's love for you and then let me know that you haven't been baptized and we can talk about it. For some of us our own baptism is vivid in our memory and for others it has been many years since we were baptized. You are precious in God's sight. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Benediction: You are each precious in God's sight. We go from this place, claiming our identity as children of God. God has called you by name so we go into the world to answer God's call. Alleluia!