



“We Are Baptized Beloveds”

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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

There were four country churches in a small Texas town: the Presbyterian church, the Baptist church, the Methodist church, and the Catholic church. Each church was overrun with pesky squirrels.

One day, the Presbyterian church called a meeting to decide what to do about the squirrels. After much prayer and consideration they determined that the squirrels were predestined to be there and they shouldn't interfere with God's divine will.

In the Methodist church the squirrels had taken up habitation in the baptistery bowl. The deacons met and decided to put a cover on the baptistery bowl and drown the squirrels in it. The squirrels escaped somehow and there were twice as many there the next week.

The Catholic group got together and decided that they were not in a position to harm any of God's creation. So, they humanely trapped the squirrels and set them free a few miles outside of town. Three days later, the squirrels were back.

The Baptist church came up with the best and most effective solution. They baptized the squirrels and registered them as members of the church. Now they only see them on Christmas and Easter.

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. We all know the story. Jesus has grown into an adult and begins his mission and ministry in the world. But first he must be baptized. He is baptized not because he has sin that needs to be washed away, but because he must wade in the same waters as all of humanity. He must feel the same stones on his soles and muddy river on his skin. In the text it says that after everyone, all of the people in the wilderness, had been baptized by John, Jesus then, and only then, was submerged in the water. Once the entire crowd was baptized Jesus was then proclaimed by God as the beloved child. And since everyone else had already been baptized, God's shout of approval was indeed for all people. The voice of God called out to humanity – “we are beloved.”

That is why honoring the lectionary and having a Baptism of the Lord Sunday every year is important in our work and worship. We need this day to remind us that we are precious to God and that we all matter. I know that we live in a world where we might feel insignificant or useless. We might feel that we don't measure up and that someone is better and more important. We might feel like we mess up way more than we get things right. I know I do. But it is during those times that we should not only remember who we are but we must recognize whose we are. We are God's beloved. We are so beloved by God that God draws us back into relationship each

and every time we mess up, each and every time we fall. That is the promise of baptism. That is the way of the cross, that no matter what, God gave up everything so that we could know we are loved.

You know, it doesn't matter if you were baptized as a baby or baptized as an adult. The age is not important because, according to Professor Karoline Lewis, baptism is first and foremost God's activity. We have done nothing to change ourselves. And just like babies who are baptized, those of us who received believer's baptism came to the waters utterly passive and receptive to God's grace. Although we made the choice to be baptized, we can't force God to love us more than God already does. When our hair is soaked and our white robes stick to us, when we hear the words, "I baptize you my sister, I baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," that is essentially God saying to us as God said to Jesus, you are my beloved child! You are my beloved. God tells us what our identity is, what our names are, just as God spoke it from heaven for Jesus. We are beloved children. And God wants us to know that more than anything else, even to the point of dying on the cross.

Now, I still ponder really difficult questions about baptism... like does it wash away our sins. You see, I'm such a perfectionist that if it were that simple to wash away everything bad I have done, I'd be getting in those waters every day before I come home from the office. But those waters aren't magic. Those waters are more like a name badge that identifies you and me as beloved. Baptism isn't about erasing our wrongs, it's about giving us an identity. By identifying with the God of creation who loves us literally to death, we now know that we are forgiven and will always be forgiven. We will sin. We will mess up. We will fail. We will falter. But, after we have been baptized, we can look down at our soul-soaked bodies, at the name tags on our chests that say "beloved" and know that God has promised to forgive us. God, through Jesus Christ identified with the throngs of humanity by being baptized in the Jordan River and today you and I identify with a loving and forgiving God, a God that calls us beloved.

Beloved is our identity. Baptism is about identity. As in our text from this morning, the voice from heaven is addressed to Jesus in the first person: "YOU are my Son, the beloved; with YOU I am well pleased." You! Preacher and author David Lose says that "Baptism teaches us who we are – God's beloved children – and confers upon us the promise of God's unconditional regard. In an era when so many of the traditional elements of identity-construction have been diminished – we change jobs and careers with frequency, most of us have multiple residences rather than grow up and live in a single community, fewer families remain intact – there is a craving to figure out just who we are. In response to this craving and need, baptism reminds us that we discover who we are in relation to whose we are, God's beloved children. We belong to God's family, and baptism is a tangible sign of that."

And just like the booming voice from heaven, God declares at the top of God's voice that we are a part of God's family. And I think that's an important thing to remember. Professor Lewis puts it really well with the question, "Does Baptism 'make' us part of God's family or does it 'announce' to us that God includes us in God's family?" And she admits that if we think baptism 'makes' us a part of God's family then baptism becomes a requirement and it is only by our own actions that God will ever accept us and love us. However, if baptism is God's 'announcement' that we are part of God's family, then it is a reminder for us to keep looking down at our name

tags that clearly say we are beloved. The announcement is a reminder that we are all loved and accepted by God. And in a world where people are kept out of communities by fear, and insecurity, and barriers, we need to see all people as beloved. We need to remind ourselves of God's announcement to Jesus, that he was a beloved child. Because God announces in your life and announces to the world that God loves you too. And it is our obligation as Christians baptized in love to call every person by their God-given name of "beloved."

Back in 1976, America's bicentennial year, a very creative writer came up with an intriguing idea. "Our nation is 200 years old," he thought. "I'll bet I can find someone who is alive today who is old enough that when they were a child, they remember someone who was then old enough to have been alive at the founding of the nation, a living link to the beginning of the country." And, sure enough, he found such a person. He was a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford, who was over 100 years old in 1976; and he remembered when he was a little boy being taken by a wagon to see his great-great grandmother who was then over 100 herself and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first American president.

When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind. She was sitting in an old chair in the corner of a dark bedroom. "We brought Burnham to see you," his father said. The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out with long, bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here." "They had to push me toward her," Burnham remembered. "I was afraid of her. But when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face. She felt my eyes and my nose, my mouth and my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight. 'This boy's a Ledford,' she said, 'I can feel it. I know this boy. He's one of us.'"

In an even deeper way when we are baptized, God holds us close and says, "I know this one. I called this one by name. This one is mine. This one belongs to me. And your name is beloved. You are one of my baptized beloveds." And we need to know this because it is indeed a difficult and dangerous world. No one can say if the bottom will drop out of the economy. We don't know when war may break out or when a loved one might get cancer. We don't know if we will lose our job or our house. God does not promise to lift us out of the surging waters of life. What God does promise us is that God will not leave God's beloveds alone. We are guaranteed in Scripture that God formed us in the womb. God knows the number of our days and the number the hairs of our head. God calls us each by name. And when we go through life's waters, the turbulent, tragic, trials of life, God will be with us. When we feel immersed in floods and fears, there is God opening up the heavens to us, comforting us with God's spirit, and calling us by name!

So, what do we take away from this Baptism of the Lord Sunday that will help us through our week? I think we need to remember that we are baptized beloveds. We are beloved. And what might help us remember that we are beloved this week? Since we are fortunate to have good, clean, refreshing water in our lives, maybe every time we sip some water, remember that Jesus is the Living Water. Maybe every time we wash our hands we might remember our baptisms and the promises that God made, the announcement that God cried out over us, saying we are beloved. Baptism isn't a once and done event just like washing our hands isn't once and done.

Living our baptisms is something we must renew daily. Sharing the love of God is something we must do each and every day. But to show love to others we must remember that we are loved. Perhaps you need to say aloud every morning, with the booming voice of God reverberating in your ears, “I am God’s beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in the world!” How would you live your life differently if you woke up every morning hearing God’s voice saying your name?

Preaching Professor Tom Long tells the story of a well-known theologian who once confessed that he was plagued many nights by a terrible dream. He dreamed that he was traveling in some distant city, and he ran into someone with whom he had gone to high school. In the bad dream, the person would say, “Henri, Henri, haven’t seen you in years. What have you done with your life?” This question always felt like judgment. He’d done some good things in his life, but there had also been some troubles and struggles. And when the old schoolmate in the dream would say, “What have you done with your life?” he wouldn’t know what to say, how to account for his life.

Then one night he had another dream. He dreamed that he died and went to heaven. He was waiting outside the throne room of God, waiting to stand before almighty God, and he shivered with fear. He just knew that God would be surrounded with fire and smoke and would speak with a deep voice saying, “Henri, Henri, what have you done with your life?” But, then, in the dream, when the door to God’s throne room opened, the room was filled with light. From the room he could hear God speaking to him in a gentle voice saying, “Henri, it’s good to see you. I hear you had a rough trip, but I’d love to see your pictures.”

So, “Fear not,” says the Lord, “I know you. I have called you by name. You are mine.” Beloveds, hear God calling out to you on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Hear God proclaiming from the heavens, “You are my baptized beloveds, all of you, so go with your soaking baptized bodies to love and serve the world.”

Amen.