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How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Trust In Our Belovedness

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I began writing this sermon in October of this year and tried to imagine what I would feel when I would preach this text on the last days of 2023. Would I feel heavy hearted and weary as I continue to see and hear about the horror and devastation of the war between Israel and Hamas? Would I feel joy of celebrating the holidays with family and friends, alongside the weariness in the world? What would be going on in my life, the life of our church, and in the world at the end of this year?

No matter what, I would long to hear, and see around me, the messages that we are loved. Apart from whatever is external or internal in me or around me, I will always long to know that I am loved. Isn't that what we all long to know, that we are loved?

We began our Advent worship series by acknowledging our weariness and we conclude today with an invitation to trust in knowing we are God's beloved children.

Our text today is an account of Jesus' baptism. In my mind I immediately think of Matthew's account where Jesus asks John the Baptist to baptize him. Initially John the Baptist refuses but Jesus insists. Today, however, we are getting a different perspective from Luke's Gospel.

Luke 3:21-22

One day when the crowds were being baptized, Jesus Himself was baptized. As He was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit, in bodily form, descended on Him like a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son, and You bring me great joy."

Beloved is not a word we use often. We typically say loved, but rarely beloved. But you know when you feel beloved by someone, right? It's a feeling of being deeply loved.

In the story of Jesus' baptism, the heavens open wide and the voice of God speaks deep love to Jesus. Some translations of Luke 3:22 read, "*in You, I find happiness and delight.*"

One of my college roommates was, and still is, so good at speaking words of affirmation and love. Oftentimes Tia's heart would overflow, and she would burst out with something like, "Jody you are just so funny, I love you so much." Every time she would say things like this to me or another I thought, 'I wish I spoke these kinds of things I felt like she does.' It always felt so good to hear her speak of her love. This story in scripture reminds me of Tia and her uninhibited sensitivity and courage to speak love.

God spoke deep love to Jesus in that moment after baptism and we get to listen to their powerful conversation and relate to all the times when we felt and have been told how deeply we are loved.

It's powerful that we have this image...God delighting in God's son. We too are also the source of God's joy. As we trust this truth that we are deeply loved by God, we live and give fully, treating all of creation with tenderness and care. And we could all be a bit more like my friend Tia, letting our deep love burst out our hearts and through our mouths to let special people in our lives know they are beloved.

There are other ways to understand our belovedness besides speaking words of love. Love comes through artistic expression. One such artist named, Lauren Wright Pittman, writes, "Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is brief and vague. He was baptized among "all the people" (Luke 3:21) by an unnamed baptizer, and until He prays the scene is rather unremarkable. During His prayer, however, an iconic scene unfolds with the heavens opening, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and a voice booming from heaven."

She wondered how she might create a piece of art of God expressing deep love to Jesus as he was baptized. Though they are powerful images, she wanted to create something differently than the typical expression of an image of Jesus in the water with clouds breaking open and a dove descending, or Jesus bursting out of water into a beam of light.

She said as she began to meditate on what was unspoken and implied in Luke's account, she imagined the moment Jesus was underwater. "How did Jesus feel when he held his breath and descended into the river?"



Beloved Digital painting and collage By Lauren Wright Pittman. Inspired by Luke 3:21-22 | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org

"This image offers a snapshot of Jesus right before he steps into his calling, on the threshold of spectacular affirmation. He is completely suspended, embraced, and upheld by the waters of baptism. The water's surface is choppy. The future is unknown and precarious. His path is a lonely and formidable one, eventually leading to His suffering and death. Despite what is to come, Jesus reaches toward the surface, breaks the plain of the water and inhales air...the breath of life. This is what trusting your belovedness feels like—muscles and bones relieved of gravity's burden, serenity, weightlessness, oneness with creation, and the warmth of God's love permeating every cell of your body and every corner of your soul."

-Lauren Wright Pittman

'We are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life'. This is what I heard when I was baptized as an 8-year-old. I heard these words every time anyone was baptized in my church. I convinced myself I would be and feel like a new person after I was baptized. I believed I would feel more loved.

Before I was baptized, I went to the altar at the end of the service and shared with the pastor my decision to follow Christ in believer's baptism. As was our church's tradition, those who made this decision stood at the front of the sanctuary after the service and all in attendance that day would come and celebrate with the new Christ follower. I was overwhelmed with tears, as an 8-year-old, when a line formed down the aisle and all the people in my church came to give me hugs and

words of affirmation on that Sunday morning in 1972.

My beliefs have expanded, and I now trust that we are all beloved children of God, no matter what our choices. But it is in the act of baptism we are marked with the cross of Christ, which is part of the miracle of grace, facilitating one's faith. I love that I had that experience, as an 8-year-old of receiving overwhelming expressions of love and words of affirmation.

I wonder how we can today, be upheld by the waters of our baptism? We know that the surface water of life is choppy. The future is unknown and precarious. But it's in remembering the waters of baptism, where we can return to help awaken the truth that we are fully loved and allow that love to flow out into the world.

Theologian Henri Nouwen wrote a book called, *Life of the Beloved*.

He says, *"Here is the truth spoken by the voice that says, 'You are my Beloved...I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours... I have molded you in the depths on the earth and knit 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 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 as I know you as my own. You belong to me. . . wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.'"*

Richard Rohr says, "We were made in love, for love, and unto love, and it is out of this love that we act."

Recently I was talking to someone who described a time when they were not feeling loved or lovable. They became aware that when they felt unloved they turned away from their relationships, therefore feeling alone and angry. In one of those moments their loved one didn't turn away, or get defensive or blaming, but instead came near and

surrounded my friend with a loving embrace. She softened and was transformed into being able to trust she was so loved.

We are here today to raise our awareness of times like this in our own lives and be met with the story of Jesus is his baptism and as He prayed, the Spirit of God awakened in Him and said, 'You are my beloved in whom I find great joy'. God desires to awaken this love in all of us, and in all creation.

So may we be awakened and even return to our baptism today. Let us pray as Jesus prayed, allowing the Spirit to awaken in us the truth that we are God's beloved children. And even when we feel unloved, we are empowered to rise up out of the waters of our experience of baptism into a world that is unsettled and unpredictable and know that as we trust that we are God's beloved children, that love will naturally flow from us into a world which so desperately needs to know.