

## **Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV**

### **Pastor Scott Trevithick**

Date: January 7, 2024, Baptism of Jesus, using resources from *A Sanctified Art*

Text: Luke 3:21-22

Title: We Trust our Belovedness

Focus: We, by the grace of God, are God's beloved who belong to God in our baptism, This is good news which addresses the weariness we experience.

### **Gospel Reading: Luke 3:21-22, The Baptism of Jesus**

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>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.'

### **Reflection on this Season**

With the scripture reading today of the Baptism of Jesus, this marks the end of this extended season from Advent through Christmas Eve and Christmastide using resources from *A Sanctified Art*. The series has been centered around the theme "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?"

We have asked, "Are you weary?" and we have recognized that many factors weigh on us, causing us to feel weary:

- Uncertain health
- Responsibilities that we often seem to bear alone, whether that be caregiving or parenting, or in a work setting
- Distress over events in the world characterized by polarization, harm and violence
- The weight of loss and grief

A few weeks ago, on December 17, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, I talked about appreciating the honesty that this theme prompts. We can acknowledge a range of emotions or responses and know that that is okay. . . **In God's house, we can be honest—inspired or tired, delighted or doubtful, connected or curious, and everything in between. This is God's house. You are welcome exactly as you are.**

I have appreciated the real stories we have accessed or experienced from Scripture—like the hardship of the longing of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a child. We have talked about Jesus’ own birth story—that his birth was miraculous in some ways, but also so very intentionally ordinary or so very real. On Christmas Eve, we talked about how Luke places the story of Jesus’ birth into a particular socio-political context and into a particular cultural and geographic setting. His birth was a real story about real people in a real Middle Eastern village.

I have appreciated that we can see ourselves in the real people in scripture. I have appreciated that we can honestly acknowledge where we are and both the joys and the challenges we experience. I have appreciated that we can talk honestly and can identify practical wisdom from scripture through this “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” and from reflection on our own lives.

We have acknowledged that

- We are weary.
- We discover joy through connection to others and to God.
- God can surprise us when we allow ourselves to experience moments of wonder or awe.
- God makes room for us and we, in turn, can make room, too, and welcome the outsider.
- We find meaning in the regular rhythms and rituals of life and of our community of faith.

## **God Declares Jesus to be the Beloved**

In that spirit of honesty and acknowledgement, we hear the good news of Jesus’ baptism. Baptism (and Communion as well) has a richness or a variety of meanings.

- What do you see, hear, or observe about the baptism of Jesus?
- What does that mean to you as we also reflect on the meaning of our own baptism?

In this brief passage we read today from Luke’s gospel, we get a glimpse of the loving affirmation of God as heavenly parent:

- And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ (Luke 3:22).

## We Belong to God

Out of all the things we could say about the meaning of baptism, one of the most powerful for me, which is evident here, is that in baptism, by the grace of God, **we belong to God**.

That’s expressed as “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased.”

Another phrase of faith expressing this is that in baptism, “**We Belong to God.**”

The phrase “**In life and in death we belong to God**” is the opening line from a contemporary affirmation of faith, though it has roots in the Reformation and echoes passage of scripture such as Paul affirming in his letter to the believers in Rome that “nothing can separate us for the love of God” (Romans 8:38).

“***In life and in death, we belong to God.***”<sup>1</sup> What that means to me is that no matter what uncertainty we face, God is present with us. We are connected; we are in relationship. We belong to God.

We don’t know the number of our days, but we place our trust in God, who we trust will accompany us—*We belong to God*.

That phrase-- *We belong to God*--seems to me to be a fitting bookend to this thematic series which asks, “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” because it is an affirmation that God is present with us no matter what we face. That God loves us and in baptism adopts us as God’s own.<sup>2</sup> We, too, are God’s beloved. Let us find our identity and security in that declaration.

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<sup>1</sup> “Brief Statement of Faith” is a confession of faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which was approved in 1991. The reunion of the northern and southern parts of the Presbyterian Church in 1983 was the occasion for creating the statement.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/brief-statement-of-faith/>

<sup>2</sup> “While Jesus is the eternal Son of God, all who are baptized into him are adopted as beloved children of God.” See “The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament, Adopted for Guidance and Practice by the ELCA,” 1997. Background 15B, p. 21.

## Upon Our Own Baptism

We have read today of these words of affirmation and belonging at the baptism of Jesus. Upon our own baptism, we hear words affirming that we belong to God:

*Name*, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.<sup>3</sup>

In our Call to Worship today, I wondered if there are days when you need to be reminded that you belong to God.

- To put in in the words of the series theme, “Are you feeling weary?” Do you need to be reminded that you belong to God, that you, too, are God’s beloved?
- Do you long to hear those words of affirmation repeated for you?
  - **You are a beloved child of God. You belong to God.**

## Remembering Our Baptism

My twin John and I were baptized at All Saints Episcopal Church in Los Angeles when we were around six months old. I have a picture of my mom and dad at the baptismal font holding John and me, but I of course don’t remember the event.

This week when members of the Thursday Women’s Bible study were discussing this story and theme, I heard that one person expressed some disappointment that since her parents chose to baptize her as an infant, that she did not have the opportunity to experience the joy that might otherwise come from that event.

Affirming that God’s promise is unfailing and God’s action in Christ is once-and-for-all<sup>4</sup>, we baptize only once. But we can be encouraged in faith as we are reminded of

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<sup>3</sup> In the order for Holy Baptism. See *ELW*, p. 231.

<sup>4</sup> See “Baptism is Once for All” in *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament, Adopted for Guidance and Practice by the ELCA*, 1997. Principle 16, p. 22.

our baptism and reaffirm its promises. The Baptism of Jesus is a fitting occasion to remember our own baptism.<sup>5</sup>

- I want you to know that you are God's beloved.
- I want you to be reminded that you are a child of God and belong to God.

We are going to remember our baptism and hear those words of affirmation in the following way:

In the same way we come forward to receive Communion, I'd like to invite you to come forward to the font.<sup>6</sup>

As you come to the font,

- I will dip my hand into the water
- I will mark your forehead with the sign of the cross and say
- **You are a beloved child of God. You belong to God.**

You may continue down to the chancel steps and walk back to your seat by the opposite aisle.

Just as we do for Communion, if you have a mobility challenge, let our usher know and I will come to you with some water from the font in the shell.

On Sundays without a baptism, the font is intentionally placed near the entrance to the sanctuary. On any Sunday, as you arrive or leave or as you come forward for Communion, you are invited to dip your own hand into the water, mark yourself with the sign of the cross on your forehead and say the words Martin Luther said to himself and taught others to do the same: "Remember that you have been baptized."

Hear this good news: In life and in death, we belong to God. You are a beloved child of God and belong to God!

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<sup>5</sup> Application 25B in *The Use of the Means of Grace*. "It is appropriate to designate such occasions as the Vigil of Easter, the Day of Pentecost, All Saints' Day, and the Baptism of Our Lord for the celebration of Holy Baptism."

<sup>6</sup> The baptismal font should be moved from its usual location inside the sanctuary near the double doors to farther down the main aisle.