

January 7th, 2024

Luke 2:21-22 “We Trust Our Belovedness”

Long after most people have taken down their Christmas decorations, the church’s halls are still decked. Yesterday was the 12th day of the 12 days of Christmas, also called “Epiphany.” It’s a day that most churches focus on the story of the magi who followed a star to bring Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. As I often point out, that story only occurs in Matthew’s gospel. Luke has shepherds, Matthew has magi. The problem I’m having is that we’ve been following the birth story in Luke’s gospel this Advent season, and that story ends with Jesus being baptized by his cousin John. This makes sense, though, because Luke’s birth story starts with the Angel Gabriel appearing to John’s father Zechariah to announce John’s birth. So every three years we preachers have to make a choice: Do we go with “We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we travel afar” or do we finish Jesus and John’s story arc in Luke? I think you’ve known me long enough to understand that I’m more of a “both/and” kind of a guy rather than “either/or” which is why I’ve included both readings this morning and used “As with gladness sages bold, did the guiding star behold” as our opening hymn. I mean, come on – I’ve got to dust off the wise men off put them on the table. Mary, Joseph and Jesus look so lonely up here with out them.

This week I’ve got to put my Bible teacher hat on to help us understand why we’ve got to end our holiday season with Jesus’ baptism. Luke made it clear from the beginning of his gospel that Jesus and John were cousins. The other three gospels include John, but Luke is the only one that mentions their familial tie. Luke doesn’t just say, “Oh, and by the way, Jesus and John were cousins. Luke starts his gospel with John. The angel Gabriel appears to a temple priest named Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child and they were to name him John. Gabriel said that John would be “great in the sight of the Lord,” and would “turn many of the people of Israel to God.” “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to

make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Who is this Lord? That’s when we’re introduced to Mary, who Gabriel said would give birth to a “mighty savior” who would “come from the house of David and redeem God’s people.” Mary was to name her son Jesus. Jesus is that Lord and savior.

The last thing we hear about John before Jesus’ birth story is in Luke 1:80 when the gospel writer says that John, “grew and became strong in spirit,” and that “he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.” After that, the story became all about Jesus. Jesus is born in a manger in Bethlehem. Jesus is dedicated in the temple where two prophets proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah who would redeem Israel. Luke includes another story that we haven’t mentioned yet concerning twelve-year-old Jesus getting lost when his family went to Passover in Jerusalem. When his family found him, he was in the Temple hanging out with the Teachers of the Law and surprising them with his knowledge of the scriptures. We’ll get to that story another day. We’re still trying to work our way to the two verses that Amber read earlier. Hang in there. We’ve got a ways to go. Finally, at the beginning of the third chapter of Luke’s gospel, we transition to the final act of Jesus’ birth story. In the “Gospel of Luke” movie I have running through my head, there’s an aerial shot of a sunrise in the Judean wilderness. The landscape is bathed in a tangerine-colored glow. Birds are chirping. A little desert fox pokes its head through the underbrush. The camera pans down to a silhouette of John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, as he heads out into the Judean wilderness to fulfill his holy destiny. He has come to proclaim a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Like the prophets of old proclaimed, John has come to be the voice crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!” so that all may see the salvation of God.

Then the scene cuts to John standing waist deep in a muddy pool in the Jordan river. His hair is all messy and wild. Flies are buzzing around. He’s yelling at a crowd of people who’ve gathered around him to be baptized. With a hoarse voice he yells, “You brood of vipers! Who

warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’” I wonder if this is what Zechariah and Elizabeth envisioned when Gabriel foretold John’s birth? “Honey, is it my imagination, or does Johnny seem kind of ... intense?” John appears to have attracted quite a few people who were asking to be baptized. “What should we do?” they asked. “I’ll tell you what you should do,” said John. “Share all your food and clothes with people who don’t have them, if you’re a tax collector quit ripping people off, if you’re a soldier quit threatening people and be satisfied with your wages!” Now, you’d think folks would turn away from someone like this, but a lot of them were saying, “You know, this might be the messiah!” And keep in mind, there were a lot of itinerant self-proclaimed prophets during that time teaching and preaching radical things and claiming to be the messiah. But John said, “No, I’m not the messiah. I’m just someone who baptizes people with water for the cleansing of sins. Someone is coming who is much better than I. I’m not even worthy of untying his sandals. I baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!” Finally the day came when Jesus went to the Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John. This is where we are this morning. This is what Amber read. Jesus was baptized, prayed to God and the heavens opened up and the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and rested on Jesus. Then God’s voice proclaimed, “You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

What does it mean to be “beloved?” What does it take to be “beloved?” Do you think you are “beloved?” If so, then by whom? If not, then why? Our question throughout this season has been, “How does a weary world rejoice?” We’ve asked a lot of questions, but I believe we’ve found some answers too. I think what we’ve learned is that belonging to God is the primary source of our joy. And in turn, we are the source of God’s joy. Some might say, “What do you mean? We’re not the source of God’s joy! We’re the source of God’s frustration! God is mad at us! God hates

our sin. We're not worthy of God's love. In fact, the only thing that makes us worthy is recognizing that we're *not* worthy. We need to fall on our knees at the feet of Jesus and beg for mercy thus quelling God's wrath. And folks, I'm not exaggerating. That's what a lot of folks have been taught to believe and it is the foundation of their understanding of Jesus' sole purpose. I'm here to challenge that notion. The only purpose this twisted theology serves is to give church leaders some leverage to get converts and keep the existing church members in line. One only has to read the words and actions of Jesus to realize that we are indeed beloved and created in the image of a gracious and loving God. As we hear these words spoken to Jesus at his baptism, we internalize these words as if they are spoken to us.

With these words in mind, theologian Henri Nouwen writes: "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 appreciate the privilege of having four gospels in our Bible. In the big picture, the story of Jesus is consistent throughout them. In the little details, each gospel writer emphasizes a facet of Jesus' life and ministry in a way that speaks to the community for whom that gospel was intended. Why do you suppose Luke is the only gospel that starts out with the story of John? In Luke's gospel we learn that John's role and responsibility was prophesied in Zechariah's song. Here, in the story of Jesus' baptism, we find the fulfillment of his parental blessing. John the Baptist did go before the Lord to prepare the way. John the Baptist did give knowledge of salvation to the people by the forgiveness of their sins. John did grow and become strong in spirit. John was affirmed by the prophecy placed on his life not only by God but also by the loving remarks of his father, Zechariah.

If we are going to trust our belovedness, could we see and receive this story as an affirmation from our Heavenly Parent? Can we see the value of baptism here and appreciate it as a ritual that reminds us that we belong to God rather than a ticket to punch to make sure we have a reservation in heaven? We are God's handiwork, created for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. We are created, called, and commissioned at our own baptism, which should fuel our joy to be children of God.

As a weary world seeks ways to rejoice, one way could be in receiving the declaration of love affirmed by God in *our* baptism as it was declared in *Jesus'* baptism. In Luke's gospel Jesus is praying. Jesus is having a conversation with God. God, a Heavenly Parent, is listening intently to Jesus praying. Luke believes that this conversation is an important thing for his readers to hear. God affirms Jesus' ministry: "You are my Son, the Beloved: with you I am well pleased." Our faith tradition allows us to hear God's voice, see the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the form like a dove, and witness the baptism of Jesus.

Let's hear from Henri Nouwen again as we close this morning. In his book, *Life of the Beloved*, he writes: "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." Think about a time in your life when you have blessed someone else. Think about a time when someone blessed you. This week, may we be freed from the trap of believing we are not worthy of God's love so that we can experience the freedom and joy that comes when we trust the One to whom we belong.