

# Beloved

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*Baptism of the Lord (C)*  
*January 9, 2022*

*Text: Luke 3:15-17,21-22*

Our gospel story begins with a flurry of excited expectation. Something is happening there on the banks of the Jordan River. In ancient times, when the Israelites first entered the promised land with God's blessing, they crossed through the Jordan, and those who come out to hear John are hoping to be part of a new beginning as God's people. They have heard John preaching that God's judgment is at hand, that the axe is at the root of the tree, that every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down, and they have taken his prophetic warning to heart, receiving baptism, entering the water of the Jordan and coming out again into the promised land as a renewed, forgiven people.

Now, these are folks with a high level of commitment and investment in John's message, and so it's natural for them to wonder when it's all going to go down. It's natural for them to wonder whether John himself might be the Messiah, the righteous leader who is going to restore a good and godly kingdom of Israel. But John tells them straight out that he is not the guy. John, who has called his congregation a brood of vipers, tells them that in fact he is far, far too soft-hearted, far too indulgent with them to be the Messiah. When the Messiah comes, John says, you'll know it. And here's how you'll know—I baptize with water, which purifies your body and your soul. I show you how to lead changed lives, sharing your possessions with those in need, and standing apart from the extortion and exploitation of Rome and its violent institutions. But when the Messiah comes, it will be too late. The Messiah is going to baptize with fire. He's not going to forgive, not going to renew. He's going to *destroy* everything that is wicked, and when he's done, only the good will remain.

What kind of Messiah was John expecting? John was looking for a hero who stood head and shoulders above the rest, someone who stands apart from the crowd in judgment, deciding who's in and who's out. The coming of this Messiah was going to be dramatic, maybe even violent, and it was going to bring a new beginning by vindicating the good and righteous people like John and those he baptized, and by eliminating their enemies.

It reminds me of a traditional Irish prayer that goes like this:

O Lord, may those who love us, love us;  
and those who don't love us, O Lord,  
turn their hearts;  
but if you don't turn their hearts, O God,  
may you turn their ankles,  
so that we may know them by their limping.

There is something in us that thrills at the discomfort and dismay of our enemies. There is something in us that wants God's justice to take the form of vindication for ourselves, and ignominious defeat for them. When I hear John preaching in this text, I get it, because those are feelings I've experienced too.

But that's not the kind of Messiah who shows up. There's no indication in this telling of the story that John even notices his cousin Jesus waiting in line to receive baptism, let alone recognizes him as the Messiah. Why should the Messiah have to confess and repent, when he's the one who is going to judge? The Messiah ought to come from above the people, not from among them. Perhaps John never came around to the idea that Jesus was the Messiah—much later, when Jesus began preaching and attracting followers, John sent representatives to ask Jesus, with some skepticism, "Are you really the one, or should we be waiting for someone else?"

And yet with the people, not apart from them, not above them, is where Jesus chooses to be. Jesus chooses to stand with people who are suffering, who are sorry for all the ways their lives have gone wrong, who are putting their hope in God for a new beginning and committing themselves to change their ways. Jesus enters the waters alongside us. Jesus is baptized with us.

And when he does this, he changes what baptism means. For John, baptism was a precaution, something to be received with fear and trembling. He looked up at a closed, silent heaven and saw a boiling up of wrath and judgment, which couldn't be contained forever. For John, baptism was about fleeing from the wrath to come. It was the first step on a journey that might or might not safely arrive at its destination, depending on whether you could maintain a righteous life. But Jesus came to baptism entirely without fear or uncertainty. As the Son of God, he had nothing to fear in the way of God's judgment. And as someone whose life was already perfectly aligned with God, he had no fear of failing to live up to the promises baptism asked of him. Instead, Jesus received this baptism on behalf of all the struggling, fearful people around him, and you and me as well. Jesus takes on our sin. He sighs our sighs. He mourns our regrets. He lifts up our hope for something new.

In baptism, Jesus binds himself to our repentance, and when he does this, it accomplishes something that we never could. It opens heaven, so that God and God's purposes can be seen, and no longer feared. It brings down the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us in our hurts and our struggles. And it brings an announcement that transforms everything: "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased!" Because when Jesus joins himself to us in baptism, those words are for us too.

New beginnings. A fresh start. These hopes and possibilities sound familiar to us as we launch into a new year. How many of us have made New Year's resolutions? And how many have already broken them? When we make a resolution to exercise or improve our diet or learn a new language, it generally doesn't touch the heart of who we are. When we make resolutions, we're tinkering around the edges, committing to pick up certain habits and discard others, or to acquire new skills. But it doesn't change the essence of our identity. But sometimes the act of making resolutions reveals something about us. How many resolutions are based on our perceived deficiencies and weaknesses? How many of them are rooted in the idea that, as of right now, we are not living out the fullness of what we were made to be? Both hope and anxiety can be found in our resolutions, as well as the belief that stating an intention is already making a new beginning. We want desperately to believe in the possibility of a new beginning, but is a good intention enough to carry us through?

Hovering around the gathering on the banks of the Jordan is also the sense that all is not well in the world. In some verses not included in today's text, John speaks openly to the wealthy, telling them they need to share what they have, that those with two coats should give one to someone who has nothing. He speaks openly to tax collectors and soldiers, telling them not to take advantage of their position to extort money from vulnerable people. But in lifting up the expectation of God's coming

judgment, John is also emphasizing that these individual changes of heart are not enough by themselves, that the cries those on the underside of the world's injustices and inequities are rising up to God and will not go unanswered forever. From where we sit in 2022, with COVID surging again, remembering the unhealed wounds of last year's attack on the U.S. Capitol, I share the sense of John and his followers that it can't go on like this, and maybe you do too. I share his hope and expectation for a dramatic and sudden resolution, and maybe because of this, I am liable to overlook the presence and movement of God in ordinary, unremarkable places, just as he did. Quite apart from the noisy spaces of politics and media, God is here, God is at work, sharing our heartache and our hope.

This is a day for remembering the story of Jesus' baptism, but it is also a day for remembering our own. In our baptism, Jesus gives us a new identity. The first thing to say about us is no longer that we don't measure up, or that we are defined by unmet hopes and aspirations. The first thing to say about us is that we are the beloved children of God. The water of our baptism continues to flow, cleansing us, claiming us, consecrating us, and, in the fullness of God's time, as water does, shaping and smoothing and refining us and all creation. Remember your baptism today, and know that God's favor rests on you, God's Holy Spirit abides with you, God is alive and moving in our world now and forever after. Amen.