

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,[a] **16** John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with[b] the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The Baptism of Jesus

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, **22** 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;[a] with you I am well pleased.”[b]

You are My Beloved

I remember my baptism. I was baptized when I was 25 years old, a response to a strange and wonderful call from the Living Christ. It was All Saints Day. I remember I had a pumpkin spice coffee that morning - homemade, Starbucks was still many years in the future. I dressed carefully, knowing that a congregation of folks still very new to me would be there to witness this monumental moment along with my parents and a few other family members. I was nervous and excited. I know I felt a longing to belong and I felt a deep call to commit myself to the

Christian walk. It was foreign and new and I wasn't quite sure what it all meant. I don't remember the service. I don't remember the words that The Rev. Tamsen Whistler spoke. But I do remember the water. I remember weeping. I remember the power of the ritual and the amazement I felt that I was being claimed by God. And that I had said yes with my whole self to Jesus' invitation to follow him. I don't remember if I was thinking of the moment as a cleansing of my sin - but it did feel like a "do-over", a fresh start, a re-birth. I had a sense of stepping across an invisible line into a new identity, a new sense of myself. A sense that I was loved - not just by the people in the room - strangers and family - but by God. And God, then and now, was and is both incomprehensible and deeply familiar.

It is hard to differentiate, 25 years later, what I have come to believe from what I believed then - but I see that moment not as the moment I became a child of God but as the moment that I understood that I was - and always had been - a child of God. And at that moment I embraced that reality and began my journey of living into my identity and belovedness. It is an ongoing and ever-evolving journey. One that has involved many

hills and valleys, many challenges and hardships, and many many moments of Grace, Joy, hope, and, most abiding, Love.

Sacramental Ritual is an important part of the human experience. St. Augustine's definition of a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace". For many of us, seeing (and feeling, tasting, smelling) is believing.

It is significant that the moment Luke describes in our text today occurs, in some form, in all four gospels. Though John does not tell the story of John baptizing Jesus, he does refer to the moment when the Holy Spirit settles on Jesus and identifies him as God's Beloved. Matthew and Mark tell the story using most of the same details that Luke does. I find it comforting and compelling that, no matter what his understanding of himself was before John baptizes him, Jesus still feels a need to participate in the ritual. He - and those he is baptized with - need to feel, hear and see the power of the Grace that is already present, already working in Jesus' life and in theirs.

It is also significant that, in the three synoptic Gospels, immediately after his baptism and the heavenly proclamation of

his Belovedness, Jesus is driven into the wilderness to endure what will presumably be the hardest weeks of his life so far. He is fortified by the ritual and the proclamation to wade into hardship and temptation - both of these events seem to be essential elements in his transformation from woodworker to Messiah.

It seems to be true in our own lives as well - when we first feel seen, heard, and loved, we can tap into the resilience we need to not only endure hardship and conflict but to be transformed for the better by it. When we are reminded of the truth of God's Grace and Love for us, we can wade into the difficult moments and conversations that are needed for growth. This is true of us as individuals and as a community.

We need to hear that we are Beloved. That we belong to God. Because who we are is very much rooted in whose we are.

I was reminded recently of the first moment I saw the face of each of my children. I remember both of those moments so clearly - the ferocity of my love for this tiny person before me. There was no doubt in my mind that this was my beloved, in

whom I was so very well pleased. Can you imagine God looking at you with that same fierce love? Can you imagine hearing God say those words to you, as you are bathed with the Holy Spirit: “You are my Beloved, my child, with you I am well pleased.” That love I felt for my children helped to fortify me for the trials and tribulations - and the unspeakable joy - of parenting. That love has been my constant companion in my life as a mother and it has pulled me through more difficult times than I can count.

There is no shortage of difficulty in this life. All too often, we have the opportunity to be challenged, tempted, stretched thin. Why not take this moment, this opportunity, to accept your true identity as God’s Beloved. To be washed in the light of God’s Grace. Maybe you have been baptized. Maybe you haven’t. Maybe you remember your baptism, maybe you don’t. Either way, you belong to God. Either way, you are loved.

Take a moment: Close your eyes. Place your left hand on your heart. With your right hand, make the sign of the cross on your forehead and silently (or out loud if you like), say to yourself. “I am God’s Beloved Child. With me God is well pleased.” Know

that this is true regardless of what you have done or left undone. Now. Open your eyes and look at the person closest to you. If you are sitting at home alone, look into the screen - or imagine someone you haven't seen in awhile. Now, say to them: "You are God's Beloved Child. With you God is well pleased." Know that this is true no matter what they have done or left undone.

Let that be enough. Let that be food for your spirit and a balm for your heart. Let it burrow deep enough into your mind that you will be fortified the next time something difficult comes your way. No matter what. You are God's Beloved Child. It is so. Thanks be to God. Amen.