

## “Marked By God’s Love”

Luke 3: 15-17; 21-22

This is always one of my favorite Sundays. It gives me the chance to truly share in the blessing of God’s love with you by being your pastor in a special and significant way. It is always so humbling for me, watching everyone come forward, seeing people dip their hands in the water. It is always so humbling for me, looking everyone in the eye and saying, “You are God’s Beloved, in whom God is well pleased.”

That’s why I love this service. It never grows old. It never gets stale. Each and every year, I am reminded of how God’s grace that surrounds us and fills us as we dip our hands into the water. I am reminded that we are all God’s children. That’s why I love this service. Because of that moment, that moment when the water is still dripping from our hands, that moment never ceases to humble and amaze me.

Each and every year, I am humbled by what I see and by what I get to experience with each and every one of you. When I look at everyone’s face as they come forward, I see is trust. I see is love. I see is grace. And I get an experience with everyone as we dip our hands in the water and it is something that I have never been able to put into words until now.

It has always seemed like the mystery of the moment could never be captured by mere words alone, that the swelling of emotions could never really be summed up in terms that we could understand, that the significance of this act of faith each and every year could never really be captured by language that only seems to limit. It seems like every year, when we come to the moment in the service, the moment when we remember our baptism, that moment when we recommit ourselves to God, that moment when we pray for renewal, it seems like every year, words fail me. Every year, it seems like words fail to capture or describe this powerful and humbling moment that I get to experience with each of you. That is until now.

#### Read Scripture: Message Version

I am not sure what is different about this year but as I sat down to begin sermon prep and I read Luke's words about Jesus' baptism, I realized that was it. He had captured exactly what I wanted to say. He had captured exactly what I was feeling in that moment that I get to experience with each of you.

That moment, when the hands are being lifted up out of the water, and they are still dripping wet, and my hands are clasping yours, and I get to look you in the eye and say, You are God's Beloved in whom God is well pleased, that moment, in its humbling and powerful nature, that moment truly does feel like the heavens are opening up and God's Spirit is descending down upon us, surrounding us with

God's grace and God's love. that moment truly does feels like the presence of God's Spirit is filling this space. Because in that moment, it becomes exceedingly clear who we are and whose we are.

Because in that moment, we are reminded that from our very beginning, we are marked by God's love and it is a mark that will not fade over time. We are reminded that it is a mark that never can be removed no matter what we do. We are reminded that it is a mark that will and does transcend all the other labels and scars that we may receive during our lifetime. Because in that moment, when our hands are still dripping wet, we are reminded that God's love is a mark that will and does become our primary identity, a mark that tells us who we are and whose we are for all times.

As I prepared for this year's service and reflected over all the past years that we have done this service together, I realized that each year this service is the same yet different. Each year we hear a similar story of Jesus' baptism yet each year the story really is different. Maybe that is why words seemed to capture the special moment for me this year. I realized that the power of the story is the same yet we are different. We are not the same people we were a year ago at this time. We are not the same people who just last year at this time dipped their hands into the water and prayed for renewal. We are not the same people. We have changed. We have grown in faith.

Yet even with the changes in our lives, at the core, we are still the same. We are still and forever will be marked by God's love. We are still and forever will be children of God.

that is why the story of Jesus' baptism speaks to us time and time again. That is why the story of Jesus' baptism is so humbling and so powerful. Because it sees beyond the changes in our lives and speaks to the very heart of our faith experience, speaks to the very heart of our experience with God. The story of Jesus' baptism speaks to the very fact that today and all days we are surrounded and filled with God's love and grace.

That's the beauty of this story. It is simplistic and three out of four Gospels capture that moment of faith in words that speak to our very heart. This year when we hear Luke's version of this story, we understand that he doesn't care about the details of the baptism. He doesn't care about who baptized Jesus or where Jesus was actually baptized. This year when Luke tells his version of this story, we understand that he chooses theology over history and speaks loud and clear about the blessing of God that is truly ours through the very public act of our baptisms.

All Luke cares about is that moment, that moment when Jesus emerges from the water, still dripping wet and the heavens open up. And then God's Spirit descends like a dove, marking Jesus with God's love for all time, and empowering Jesus for his mission and his ministry.

For Luke the purpose of the Spirit is not to make Jesus the Son of God. Luke has already told us this fact through all of his birth narratives and the angels' appearance. No, for the Luke, the purpose of the Spirit is to empower Jesus for his task, the task of spreading the news that God had come to be with God's people, the task of making God visible for all the people of God, the tasking of sharing the life-giving and life-transforming news that is the Gospel, a gospel of peace, hope and grace.

And the same holds true for us today. The purpose of our baptisms is not to make us sons and daughters of God. It is not to make us the people of God. No, we are already claimed and named as such from our very beginning. No, the purpose and point of our baptisms is to empower us as servants of the Kingdom of God. It is to affirm our relationship with God, a relationship that began even before we were born. The purpose and point of our baptisms is for us to make a public declaration of faith that claims our true identity and helps us become the people God created us to be.

For Luke, the baptism of Jesus is a huge turning point in his gospel, not because of the act itself, but because of what comes after that baptism. Jesus is marked by God's love, empowered by the Holy Spirit and sent into the world to share God's love and grace with all the people through word and deed. Luke understands that the name "Beloved", that the name "child of God" comes with a

mission. It doesn't just stop with the knowledge that we are claimed and named by God. That's only the beginning of the blessing.

The blessing continues as we leave this place, our hands still dripping wet, and we go, empowered by the Spirit, to share the good news of grace and peace that has been shared with us. The blessing doesn't end with us. The blessing cannot end with just us. Because if it does, we miss out on the true powerful, humbling, and empowering blessing that is God's love.

The challenge that we all face is that in the moment of our baptism, in the moments when we remember our baptism, we want to stay in that moment. We want to stay in that safe comfort place where we know we are loved, where we know we are claimed and named by God, where we know grace abounds.

But if we do this, we are not being true to the gift that is God's love. We fall short of the true grace that comes with the waters of baptism. God's love is not just meant for you and for me. God's love is not just meant for people who go to church every Sunday. God's love is not just meant for the people who are in this building. God's love is not meant to make us feel warm and fuzzy nor is God's love meant to make us feel comfortable.

When we truly open our hearts to God's love, it does feel like the heavens are opened up and we begin to understand that we are different yet the same. We are different because we have been transformed yet we are still the same because

the mark of God's love stays our primary identity. In that moment, when the water is still dripping from our hands, the heavens open up and God's grace surrounds. And we are inspired and empowered to go out into the world and share this blessing with all of God's children everywhere. When we truly open our hearts up to God, we begin to understand what a gift has been shared with us through God's love and what an amazing and humbling mission that we have been given as beloved children of God.

In that moment, when the water is still dripping, we are marked, marked by God's love, empowered by the Spirit and we are sent to share the good news of God's welcoming and unconditional love and grace to all of God's creation.

Today as we remember our baptism, remember what it was like to emerge from the water, remember what it was like to have the water on our fore heads and remember God's promises made to you that day.

Remember that we are claimed and named. remember that we have been transformed and that our lives are called to blessings for others.

Remember that from the moment we emerge from the waters, we are called to begin to live a life based on the principles of the Kingdom of God. And realize that our mission in life is God's mission for the world: love, healing, comfort, justice and peace.

Remember you are marked by God's love, empowered the Spirit, and sent out to share the good news of God's love and grace.

In just a few moments, you will be invited to come forward and remember your baptism. Remember the details of that day. Remember emerging from that water. And to remember what happened after your baptism.

Remember your call as one of God's children to bring hope and grace to all that are hurting.

remember you call as one of God's servants to support those around you on their journey.

remember your call to pray for one another and to pray to nourish your spirit. Remember that you are blessed through the Holy Spirit to renew, to refresh, to inspire those around you.

Remember that you are marked by God's love, a mark that will never fade over time, a mark that will and does transcend all the other labels and scars that we may receive during our lifetime. A mark that is our primary identity, a mark that reminds who we are and most importantly whose we are.

May we leave this place empowered by the Spirit, ready for our missions and ministry. Amen.