

WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH



SERMON

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# Beloved

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Today we conclude our sermon series *A Weary World Rejoices*<sup>1</sup>. Rather than deny its presence within our lives, we brought our weariness with us as we prepared for the birth of the Christ child in Advent. We sought soothing stories in the Gospel of Luke only to be confronted in the first chapter with “during the reign of King Herod.”

This simple marker reminds us that God enters human flesh during a time of political terror. Once we know the landscape, the gospel proceeds to tell the stories. God interrupts the weariness of an aged Zechariah and Elizabeth, and an innocent Mary, ordinary characters, like you and me, with answered prayers and new life. These new parents experience joy. Within their weary world, they rejoice at God’s presence in their lives and the promises for their sons’.

On Christmas Eve we anticipated the joy of Jesus’ birth. Ready to sing *Silent Night* and *Joy to the World*, only to have the writer throw cold water on our naivete.

Chapter two of Luke begins, “in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the creators of *A Sanctified Art* for the liturgies, devotionals, art work, and ideas to launch *A Weary World Rejoices*. Throughout the Advent, Christmastide, and into Epiphany our worship, small groups, and Sunday School lessons remained unified, bringing us to a deeper appreciation for the Gospel of Luke and God’s gifts.

registered.” Hostile rulers impose new schemes to control, tax, and wreak havoc across the world. And God sends defenseless shepherds to soothe Mary and Joseph’s weariness.

Today marks the pivot from the season of Christmastide, yes, twelve days of Christmas, to the season of Epiphany. Epiphany literally means revealing. Anxious to learn of God’s intent for our lives through Jesus, the third chapter of Luke never relents. It pounds away.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region..., during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas...(Lk 3:1-2)

The gospel reads like our frontpage news with headlines of thick hierarchy of political maneuvering and abusive rulers pervading the region when John and Jesus reach adulthood.

Into this battlefield for control, the writer lets us know, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”

To escape the tight surveillance people follow John into the countryside. He preaches of Jesus’ coming. He calls for an

end of entitled living. He tells them to welcome the messiah by changing their hearts and minds.

Then he washes them clean in baptism.

John's good news and influence goes viral.

He goes even further. John says what everyone knows but is too scared to mention: he calls out Herod's evil. Everyone needs to change, including those at the top.

Herod responds. He throws John the Baptist in prison.

This is the world into which God sends Jesus. Before I read what comes next, please pray with me.

*Beloved God,*

*Through the pages of scripture, you have spoken your love for us against an echoed refrain of fear.*

*Too often your good news rolls off of us like water, barely touching us.*

*Make today different.*

*As we read your Word aloud,*

*let the truth of your love cover every part of our being.*

*May we hear your echoes of "beloved" deep within us*

*Tune us to listen to your voice. Amen.*

## Luke 3:21-22

<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."

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How many times in your life have you approached water with suspicion? Skirted the shoreline. Stood at a safe distance from the waves wondering, if it will be a gentle, bath-like float, maybe a refreshing dip.

Or, have you tensed up, fearing its power either visible or under the surface will overwhelm you?

Think of the movies in which water represents this mystery. A pool to lift you. A current to strengthen you. A depth to test you. A place to destroy you. Harry Potter and the *Goblets of Fire*. So many Disney classics. *Titanic*. *The Perfect Storm*. *Nyad*.

For me, one of the iconic scenes of a watery revelation is from the movie *The Piano*. Holly Hunter won an academy award for her portrayal of a Scottish woman, Ada, whose father sold her in the mid-1800s to a frontiersman in New Zealand. She sails



to the literal ends of the earth with her daughter and beloved piano. Mute by choice, Ada clings to her piano as the instrument to mediate her life.

At the end of the movie, Ada sets sail again with her piano strapped to a small craft, heavy with passengers and rowers, to cross the turbulent, south Pacific seas.

When the waves threaten to drown the entire boat, she surrenders to the pleas from others, and lets them untether her piano and heave it overboard. Watching it sink, with the rope that once held the piano now coiling past her, Ada places her foot in its loop. She is dragged down.

After the shock, calm covers her face as she descends into this womb-like sea. This could be her way out; a release from the struggle; an unpremeditated escape after years of being controlled and bartered by others. Consider it her victory. She no longer needs to live in a cocoon of silence to battle their evil.

As she descends with her piano, you see her face consider the decision (Its why Hunter won the Oscar). Choose life and all the work to reenter anew. Or finally be free from living in *their* world and rest in a calm, watery grave.

The scene sears in memory.<sup>2</sup>

Who hasn't experienced if not a near-drowning trauma, a moment when life grinds you into the depths. You may have gasped for air after a bad diagnosis or be unable to rise after repeatedly stumbling from chronic poor health. You carry a debt-burden no one suspects. Or some no-way out situation tries your soul.

What does it take to live? How do you begin?

That's the reality of Jesus' baptism.

Born into a poor family in occupied territory, his life begins with restraints. Someone warned him that certain things cannot be said.

Mind the boundaries imposed upon you. Understand they will treat you like a second-class citizen, at best. Your life is expendable.

He joins the others who leave the city. Even though he stands, as scripture says, "with all the people," Jesus' baptism is as solitary an event as the rest of them. Unlike our modest

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<sup>2</sup> I omitted any spoiler alerts or hint at the choice. Watch for yourself.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLUrEgC-Dd4>

Presbyterian practice that moistens a forehead, in the tradition of baptism in the first century, Jesus is plunged into the deep.

Hopefully he catches his breath before going under. He becomes weightless, his muscles and bones become relieved of gravity's pull.

When underwater, he feels suspended, freed, and then vulnerable. Just like the rest of us, he needs air. He knows that when he rises to the surface, his life changes. God calls him to ministry.

He will lead those dripping wet people who stand beside him, and the whole world, to a new way. The weight of this now rests entirely on him.

That's what I imagined.

Luke's gospel tells the shortest story of Jesus' baptism. The brevity ensures the focus remains on God's hand directing Jesus' life, without distracting us by pointless details.

Did you notice? Of all the times I've read, studied, and preached from Luke, I never really noticed. This story is only about God and Jesus.

The spotlight that had been on John, his purpose and prophecy fades when Herod throws him in prison. Before Jesus enters the waters, John's gone.

Who baptizes Jesus? From this gospel's perspective, it does not matter. Luke focuses entirely on the grand miracle and fiery lights for us to witness God's hand at work. This is God's doing.

Jesus prays and then:

the heavens open  
the spirit descends – so tangible as if a bird  
a voice speaks: “You are my Son, the Beloved;  
with you I am well pleased.”

This story is about God and Jesus. And the story is also about you and me.

As Christians, we believe that humankind never fully understood God's intent for our lives until God became like you and me. God enters this finite human life and does so without ceasing to be God and without compromising the integrity of being you and me.

That's the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus remains fully human, vulnerable to drowning, impassioned about living, in

love with people, and sentenced to dying. For God to stoop so low to join into the human race as Jesus, teaches us we have purpose and destiny beyond those limits we feel.

God loves our lives to an infinity beyond anything conceived by humankind. The belovedness God declares of Jesus in his baptism extends to us in our baptism. Once we know that belovedness we can look at one another knowing they too receive that same gift.

In the light of Epiphany, we see that the goal of human life isn't simply to be ethically upright, politically powerful, or autonomous. Rather, it is to share in the divine nature.

We can lay down our arms against one another. We can be more patient, more tolerant of differences, imperfections. We share in a grace that gives everyone a second chance, including ourselves.

We can set down our desire to win the political and economic and social battles. We might not change the headlines, but we can prove by the way we choose to lift one another, we are beloved. That's the life Jesus lives. Sharing. Loving.

And those who continue to grasp for power and privilege? They find their hands empty – both then and now.

For your own sake, and for the sake of those around you, hear God's word declared over you in Christ. Receive the promise of that deep, sustained, belovedness. It's yours. And then go give it away.





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