

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Where Heaven Meets Earth

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Prayer for Illumination

Holy God,

Help us to hear to your word anew.

Open the Scriptures to us in a way that is life-giving.

And stir our hearts to live as ambassadors of your Kingdom in our daily lives.

Amen.

Scripture

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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15 As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 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 strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with 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.”

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; with you I am well pleased.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Belovedness

Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz Weber once preached a sermon in a women's prison on this Scripture reading. Near the end, she told the women gathered that she had recently attended a 12-step meeting. At the meeting, folks were talking about what their "higher power" was like, and who the "God of their understanding" is. And an older guy, sober for around 45 years, stated a simple and astonishing truth: "I don't know about you," he said, "but my God is crazy about me."

Whether told in a room of recovering alcoholics, a gathering of imprisoned women, a church in the suburbs of Pittsburgh—it is still a simple and astonishing truth: Our God is crazy about us.

When Jesus was baptized, the heavens broke open, like they just could no longer be contained, the Spirit descended, and God spoke, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This was not the first time God spoke belovedness over a person. It was not the first time God called someone God's child.

Yes, Jesus was particular in his divinity, showing us most clearly who God is. But, here in his baptism, Jesus also show us who we are to God. In his baptism, surrounded by a community of ordinary people— sinners seeking forgiveness, the faithful hoping for God's Kingdom, the desperate looking

for a new world breaking in—Jesus in his humanity shows us who we are to God.

Beloved.

Jesus was not the first to be loved by God, to be delighted over by God, to be called beloved by God. But he may be the first to truly believe it.

Before any healing or any showdowns with the teachers of the law, before calling any disciples or teaching on a hill to thousands, before withstanding temptation or multiplying bread, before choosing death rather than raising a sword or resurrecting and bringing new life to all creation— when his life was a promise yet to be fulfilled—Jesus was called beloved. And he believed it. Everything else was dependent upon that truth named and witnessed at his baptism.

Listening for God to Speak

Backing up just a little bit. Luke adds a detail to this story that the Gospel writers, Luke and Matthew, do not. Before the heavens open and the dove flies down and the voice resounds, before all of that, Jesus was praying. Throughout Luke's Gospel, he makes note of these moments of quiet withdrawal into prayer. Jesus tends to pray before pivotal events happen. Jesus prays before calling the first disciples, he prays before he is first called Messiah, he prays before the transfiguration,

he prays before he teaches his disciples how they should pray, he prays before he is arrested, and he prays before he ascends to heaven...that isn't even an all-encompassing list.

Now, Jesus was a Jewish man. He prayed daily. It was so commonplace that the Gospel writers do not bother to note the three times each day that Jesus and his followers would have prayed. Yet, Luke lifts these specific times of prayer, never putting words to the prayers of Christ, but inserting withdrawal, silence, space, mystery into the story.

The people are baptized in the Jordan, Jesus among them, and then a pause. It is not in the action, in the splashing of the water or the words of John the Baptist, that heaven breaks open. It is in the space of prayer.

The pause...stillness before God.

Enough time and space to actually hear what God will say, to see what God will do.

One study in 2023 (take it with a grain of salt, but this matches my experience) showed that Americans get 63 minutes of quiet per day. We are bombarded by voices and noise, music and podcasts and audiobooks, TV and smartphones and advertisements while we pump our gas— we know our

attention is all over the place. It can be hard even in worship to allow gaps of silence and stillness. It's uncomfortable.

As a culture, we tend to prioritize doing over being, action over contemplation, even within our church cultures, we can prioritize mission over prayer.

Of course, these are false dichotomies. We need both/and. God does not call us only to prayer and quiet and just being. But it's difficult, perhaps impossible, to hear God's word of belovedness when we are surrounded by other voices, noise, and tasks to get done.

Jesus prays, and God's word in the stillness to the community is one of love—not for what he had accomplished, but because of joy God has in God's child, in this image bearer. Luke makes us witnesses, not so we can place Jesus on a pedestal of what only he can do and who only he can be, but so we might follow him.

God's Spirit is available to us, too, when we make space to listen. God's word comes to us, too, that we are beloved. A child of God, in whom God is pleased. We are image bearers. We are loved before we do anything. Where we so easily go astray is that we do not believe it. We resist the belovedness in ourselves, and we are unable to recognize it in others.

Back in the first century, the writer of 1 John expressed concern to an early Christian community that they were struggling to discern who and what to listen to. Again and again the writer of the letter reminds them that they are children of God; that they are called to love one another because love is from God—God is love; and love casts out fear.

So, if someone tells them that they are not children of God, that is not a voice to be listened to. If someone tells them to hate their neighbor or to fear the other, that is not a voice to be listened to. If someone claims to have knowledge of God, but is not living a life a love, that is not a voice to be listened to.

This was written before social media, before cable news, before podcasts, before Op Eds, before radio, before the printing press, before all the ways—for better and worse—that communication has dramatically increased the number of voices that we hear every day.

Friends, hear God's voice speaking to your hearts: You are a beloved child of God. God is crazy about you.

God is crazy about your neighbor. God is crazy about the people around you who look, think, and act differently than you.

If you find the voice of God lost in the mess of noise surrounding you, turn down the noise, follow Jesus into stillness and just listen. Jesus did nothing until he heard God's word of belovedness. Everything else depended upon believing that word.

Jesus sorted in his own life the wheat from the chaff and let all that was not God's Word of love blow away like ashes in the wind.

Like Chaff

And so, we finally end where the text began: With the fiery words of John the Baptist.

This Sunday is not one that I would have chosen a text that speaks of fire at all if it were not for the lectionary. We have all seen this week the devastation of fire and wind taken together in LA. Our hearts break for the destruction uncontrolled fires wreck on homes, on wildlife, and on the health, wellbeing, and lives of those in evacuation zones.

Too often, John the Baptist is understood as a prophet of fire in the sense of destructive judgement. And this is why we had to work our way backwards in this text, so we don't misunderstand God's posture toward us, and imagine scenes of devastation.

We start with belovedness. We start with God's delight in God's children.

Just as Genesis begins with the Spirit creating over the waters and called proclaiming it all "good," and all of us, "very good." There is first, blessing. There is first, love. The heart of this passage— as with all of God's word to us— is Jesus and the word of God revealed through him. That is our lens for understanding John Baptist. And it was John's lens for understanding himself.

John stood in the wilderness calling people to new life, to new community, to the Kingdom of God. Their hearts were ready for something new. He prepared them with this baptism of repentance. He prepared them with passionate words of reproach for the "way we've always done things."

The realm of God, John proclaimed, was not about self-righteousness or wealth or prestige. The realm of God would be good news to those without a coat, those without hope in the current system, those sinners who recognized their own shortcomings.

The One John waited for would toss the old ways to the wind. The One John waited for would burn away all that did not nourish God's Kingdom of peace, justice, and abundance.

To experience belovedness, to hear the Spirit's whisper that God is crazy about us, that God is crazy about our neighbors, and to believe it— that shakes free the old, useless chaff in our lives of superiority, shame, fear, self-righteousness, selfishness, self-pummeling. God's word about us in baptism is the same that Jesus heard that day when heaven met earth: You are beloved. Let the other voices quiet. Let the chaff blow away. Let the fire of love refine you that you, too, might believe that God is crazy about you.

Where Heaven Meets Earth

There was a man, who I got to know near the end of his life. He had a large family of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, who he loved and of whom he was very proud. He had a distinguished career, a long marriage, and of course some bumps and mistakes along the way.

At the end of every phone call or visit I had with him; he would remind me of the most important thing about him: God loved him. God always had and always would.

It was not the mistakes that defined him. It was not the success. It was nothing he had done or left undone. It was what came before all of that. The Word God spoke about him before anything he had accomplished: You are my beloved. God was crazy about him. And he had come to believe it.

I don't want to be too sentimental here. There is much work to do in the world for the sake of peace and justice. I'll speak for myself— there is much for me to repent of, to seek forgiveness and reconciliation, there is a mission God calls me into—to join in the Spirit's work of breaking down barriers, caring for those in need, praying for God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

But because heaven met earth in the Jordan River 2000 years ago, I know that to follow Christ, I have to start by listening for God's Word of belovedness to me. I have to start by believing that God is crazy about me. Then I can love the way Christ has called me to love.

So, pause, listen to God reminding you:

You are my beloved child. In you I am well please.

God is crazy about you.

Let the Spirit blow away the rest until you actually believe it.

Amen.



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