

# How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We trust our belovedness.

## Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Mark 1:4-11  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
January 7, 2024

Beginning on the First Sunday of Advent, and concluding on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we have been exploring ways to rejoice in our weary world. Using resource material from A Sanctified Art, we have looked at **how we can experience joy through the themes of acknowledging our weariness, making connections, allowing ourselves to be amazed, singing stories of hope, making room through hospitality, and rooting ourselves in ritual.** We conclude by focusing on a theme that has been dear to my heart since my days in seminary over 30 years ago: **trusting that you and I are beloved children of God.** Ultimately, the primary source of our joy is rooted in the fact that we belong to God, the Divine, the Sacred Presence that is beyond, among, and within you and me and all of creation.

On the liturgical church calendar, today marks the first Sunday after Epiphany, which is always on January 6, the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. This Sunday is always designated as Baptism of the Lord Sunday, with the assigned lectionary gospel reading of Jesus' baptism coming from either Matthew, Mark, or Luke. We are entering a year that will primarily focus on Mark.

You may have noticed that in our reading from the Gospel of Mark, his entire work starts with Jesus' baptism, marking the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Mark, considered the first of the four Gospels to have been written, has no narratives concerning Jesus' birth. By verse 10, Mark writes:

And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

**This story has long been interpreted not just as the telling of a one-time historical event, but expanded theologically to include all those who are baptized.** Therefore, as we hear the words spoken to Jesus at his baptism, you and I are to internalize these words as if they are spoken directly to us as well. "You are my Beloved, with you I am well pleased." A Presbyterian understanding of baptism functions somewhat as our initiation into the family of God, marking a starting point and a new beginning in a life-long journey of faith. Even though January 1<sup>st</sup> is simply another day on the calendar, the one that follows December 31, **there is something special and symbolic in the turning of the yearly calendar. For there is a strong desire in most people to seek a way to begin again, believing God is a God of new beginnings,** and 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> or 100<sup>th</sup> changes.

Fresh starts, however, are challenging because we are working with the same person who was part of the past – ourselves. It has been shown that **it is difficult to leave the past behind because somehow it is comfortable in that we grow accustomed to behaving and responding in familiar ways, whether they are healthy or not.** But yes, fresh starts are possible. And it begins, as you might expect, with some serious reflection. As I stated in my *Word from the Pastor* article in our January Church Newsletter that was emailed last Thursday:

This is a good opportunity to decide what to **take with you** (and us) into this new year (that which is life-giving), and what to **leave behind** (that which needs to be let go).

It's also helpful to reflect upon what it is you, and we together as a community of faith, **want to add to our journey this year.** The recently deceased Bishop Carlton Pearson, who late in his ministry of inclusion was associated with All Souls Unitarian Church here in Tulsa, would send out an email detailing how each January he initiated a deliberate, **physical, mental, and spiritual detox.** Now, I understand a **physical detox**, primarily through a change in eating habits, more exercise and enough sleep - anything that is more beneficial to the body. Participating in what is called a "Dry January" is becoming increasingly popular.

I was especially intrigued, however, in Carlton's idea of a **mental and spiritual detox.** So, here's the important question. **What have you been putting into your mind, your feelings, and your spirit that is toxic?** It may be holding on to resentment or bitterness. And for many, if not most of us, we find that simply following the **daily news** of what's going on in our country and around the world has become a toxic mix of **constant negative stimulation.** Therefore, Carlton Pearson encourages, **"Let's make some new and better personal choices that will affect and enhance the rest of our lives on the planet and in this plane of consciousness."**

Circling back to the theme for this day, then, one of the things we can take with us into this new year, or perhaps add for the first time, is **trusting that we belong to and are beloved by God – just as Jesus was.** I mentioned earlier how this theme has been dear to my heart throughout my entire ministry. So, I looked this week and found a sermon I preached way back in 1997, 27 years ago, and read the following.

The renowned Catholic priest and spiritual author, **Henri Nouwen**, wrote an incredible book in 1992 entitled, **"Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World."** In it he writes:

Yes, there is that voice, the voice that speaks from above and from within and that whispers softly or declares loudly: 'You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.' It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable, [you are an abomination,] you are nobody — unless you can demonstrate the opposite.' These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them.

Nouwen adds, **"That's the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection. Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection...** As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone or abandoned, I find myself thinking: 'Well, that proves once

again that I am a nobody.' Instead of taking a critical look at the circumstances or trying to understand my own and others' limitations, **I tend to blame myself — not just for what I did, but for who I am. My dark side says: 'I am no good... I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected and abandoned.'**"

Can you relate in some way to these words and feelings? If we're honest with ourselves, I'm sure we all can at some level. I do. Henri Nouwen warns:

You have to keep unmasking the world about you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and, in the long run, destructive. **The world tells you many lies about who you are, and you simply have to be realistic enough to remind yourself of this.**

Every time you feel hurt, offended or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: 'These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that **I am the chosen child of God**, precious in God's eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity and held safe in an everlasting embrace.'

As we enter into this new year of 2024, perhaps we can help and encourage each other by **reminding ourselves and others of our and their chosenness, and to trust our belovedness.** For indeed, you belong to God, you are called by name.

A couple more quotes from Henri Nouwen's *Life of the Beloved* that I have found deeply meaningful in my own spiritual journey, and find myself needing to return to, and you might as well.

To be chosen as the Beloved of God is something radically different. **Instead of excluding others, it includes others.** Instead of rejecting others as less valuable, it accepts others in their own uniqueness. It is not a competitive, but a compassionate choice.

And, "When our deepest truth is that we are the Beloved and when our greatest joy and peace come from fully claiming that truth, it follows that this has to become visible and tangible in the ways we eat and drink, talk and love, play and work."

Notice the connection between our spirituality and our actions. To close our exploration of finding ways to rejoice in our weary world, I want to read a short poem by the **Rev. Sarah Speed**, who wrote the worship liturgy we have been using over the past month, and which is included in the A Sanctified Art resource material.

### **The Bravest Thing We Can Do**

by Rev. Sarah Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org

Trust your belovedness.  
Let it be a protest,  
an act of resistance,  
a song of celebration.  
Trust your belovedness in a world  
that is rarely satisfied.

Wear it like a badge of honor.  
Speak it as confidently as your last name.  
Tattoo it to your heart.  
When outside forces  
chip away at your sense of self,  
when life asks you  
to hand over the keys,  
remember the water.  
Remember creation.  
Remember how it was good,  
so very good.  
Let that truth hum through your veins.  
Sing it so loud  
that it drowns out the weariness of the world,  
**for the bravest thing we can ever do  
is trust that we belong here.**

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, Advent 2023.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992).