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*Luke 3:21-22*

 *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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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If you’ve spent much time around toddlers, you might recall just how startling it is when they begin to speak in complete sentences. For the first year or two of their lives, you get used to them speaking their typical first go-to words: “mama,” “dada,” “bottle,” and, of course, many toddlers’ favorite, “no!” It can be quite a surprise when, seemingly overnight, they gain the capability of stringing those words together to form a basic sentence.

 I’ll never forget when our three year old, Hazel Grace, started speaking a very particular and endearing sentence. One might think that she was simply mimicking a sentence she had heard elsewhere and didn’t actually know what it meant. But her delivery suggested otherwise. One day, I got home from church and Hazel Grace beckoned me to get down on her level so I knelt to be face-to-face with her. She looked me in the eye, and with a beaming smile, simply said: “I’m so *proud* of you!” And then gave me a hug.

 That’s what belovedness is. It’s a love without conditions, terms, or fine print. It’s a connection that can’t be severed by the tests of time, the reality of imperfection, or even its very rejection. Belovedness simply *is*. We’ve journeyed through many themes this Advent/Christmas season: weariness, connection, amazement, hope, hospitality, and ritual. We conclude this season by trusting in our belovedness.

 Of course, belovedness isn’t conferred in today’s passage by the child, but by the Holy Parent. Jesus begins his earthly ministry in the waters of his baptism, the same waters in which our baptismal promises were sealed. As those waters are, in fact, one in the same, Baptism of the Lord Sunday is a liturgical reminder that if God finds joy in Jesus, then God equally finds joy in us! In other words, as our deepest joy is found in God, God’s deepest joy is first and foremost found in us!

 But that can be a hard thing to trust. It can be a hard thing to hold on to when so much of the world gives us such a very different message.

 In a book that y’all have heard me quote so very often, Brené Brown says the following of self-trust in her most recent work, “Atlas of the Heart.” “Self-trust is normally the first casualty of failure or mistakes. We stop trusting ourselves when we hurt others, get hurt, or question our worth.”

 Furthermore, the great Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen, once said the following of the voice of God assuring us of our belovedness: “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 nobody - unless you can demonstrate the opposite.’ These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. That’s the great trap. It is the trap of self-rejection.”

 These words beg the following questions: “When we fail to trust our belovedness, what are the consequences? When we trust our belovedness, how does this trust change our behaviors, attitudes, and actions.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

 **I believe that when we fail to trust our own belovedness, we are then less likely to see that belovedness in our neighbor.**

 Again, Henri Nouwen once said the following: “I must tell you that claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. . . . It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness. The blessed one always blesses.”

 So friends, this week I invite you to ponder your own belovedness. Remember the waters of your baptism. Remember that there’s no place on this on this earth - either below or above it - or in this life - either before or after it - that can threaten your belovedness in the sight of God. There will be days when you don’t feel it. Days when you can’t fathom why God would ever look at you beaming and say, “I’m so *proud* of you.” And that’s ok. Hear now the Good News of the Gospel: your belovedness is predicated neither upon your belief or your understanding. It’s predicated merely by God’s grace. Nothing more and nothing less.

 In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s beloveds, say: **Amen.**

1. These questions/prompts are from the Sanctified Art materials for "How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)