

A sermon entitled:
How can a weary world rejoice?
We embrace our Belovedness!
From the text: Luke 3:21-22
Preached by Rev. Peter J. Blank
Plymouth Presbyterian Church
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Can you imagine being in the crowd that day? The air was thick with anticipation—the promise of the Messiah finally coming. And then, Jesus steps forward. The Son of God joins the line, humbling himself to be baptized alongside everyone else. And as he rises from the water and begins to pray, heaven itself is torn open! The Holy Spirit, radiant and visible, descends like a dove, and the voice of the Father echoes through the heavens: “You are my beloved Son; I’m so proud of you.” Oh, what a moment! Can you feel the electricity? No wonder each gospel writer couldn’t help but record this moment of divine affirmation.

Let me ask you, when’s the last time you heard those words from someone who mattered? “I love you. I’m proud of you.” Some of us can’t even remember. But let me tell you something incredible: Jesus’ ministry begins with these words. Not with a parade or military might, but with a simple act of solidarity and the resounding declaration of his belovedness.

Did you catch that? Before Jesus performs a single miracle, preaches a single sermon, or resists a single temptation in the wilderness, God speaks this truth over him: “You are my beloved.” Before he calms storms, heals the sick, or feeds the multitudes. Before he’s betrayed, rejected, and nailed to a cross, God’s voice says, “I am so pleased with you.” Jesus is loved—not for what he does but for who he is.

And here’s the breathtaking beauty: Jesus spends his entire ministry sharing this message of belovedness. To every outcast, sinner, and

broken-hearted person he encounters, he extends the love of the Father. It's the message that God so loved the world he sent his Son to save it, not condemn it. It's the promise that nothing—not sin, shame, or death—can separate us from God's love. Through Jesus, we too are declared beloved children of God.

This is what we celebrate today, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday. In baptism, we are united with Christ, claimed as God's own, and marked by this unshakable truth: "You are my beloved." Whether the skies split open or remain quiet, God's voice continues to speak this over us. "You are my beloved child. I love you, just as you are."

But let's be honest. Believing this is hard, isn't it? Our world works overtime to convince us otherwise. The voices of social media, advertising, coworkers, and sometimes even our families whisper lies: "You're not enough. You're unworthy. You'll never measure up." And we've all felt it. That creeping doubt that wonders, "Could God really love me?"

Henri Nouwen, a beloved Christian writer, addressed this struggle in his book, *Life of the Beloved*. Writing to a friend, he says, "All I want to say to you is this: You are the Beloved." But Nouwen knew the challenge of holding onto this truth in a world filled with negativity. He wrote, "The voices that shout, 'You are no good, you are ugly, you are worthless' are so loud and persistent that it is easy to believe them. That's the great trap of self-rejection."

And friends, this might be one of the greatest heartbreaks of ministry: watching people struggle to believe they are loved. So many carry wounds—from mistakes they've made or the pain inflicted on them—and they wonder if they'll ever be enough. They imagine God's voice as one of anger, shame, or rejection instead of delight. These wounds shape how they see themselves and how they live.

But let me tell you something powerful: Hurt people hurt people, but loved people love people. When we embrace the truth of our

belovedness, it changes everything. Father Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, has seen this transformation firsthand. Working with former gang members in Los Angeles, he tells them repeatedly: “You are exactly what God had in mind when He made you.” And he’s watched as this truth pierces through self-hatred, replacing it with hope and purpose. Boyle writes, “When people begin to inhabit this truth, nothing is the same again. No bullet can pierce it, no prison walls can contain it, and death can’t touch it.”

Friends, how does a weary world rejoice? By trusting in this truth: We are beloved. When we remember our baptism, we reclaim our identity as God’s children. And when we truly grasp God’s delight in us, it unlocks our capacity to love and bless others.

Nouwen put it beautifully: “Claiming your own blessedness always leads to a deep desire to bless others. It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to call forth their beauty and truth, when you are in touch with your own blessedness.”

So, before you worry about loving others or blessing the world, hear this: “You are the Beloved.” That is your truest identity. That is who you really are. And when you trust this, when you let it sink into your soul, everything changes. You stop striving and grasping. Compassion replaces anger. Generosity flows naturally. And the Spirit empowers you to love the unlovable, to extend grace to the broken, and to shine the light of Christ in dark places.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, let us remember: We are loved beyond measure. We belong to God. And that love has the power to heal, to transform, and to rejoice a weary world. Amen.