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Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Baptism, Blessing, Beloved

The authors of Isaiah and of Luke's Gospel seem to be in agreement. God loves loving. From across thousands of years, we hear the voice of God speaking first to the lost and lowdown exiled Israelites, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior ... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." How wonderful that must have sounded, and yet to a people 'bloodied, bruised, and beleaguered' it might have been somewhat hard to believe. What about you and me? Do you believe the promise? That God has called you by name, claiming you. Do I believe that the waters will not overwhelm me? That the fire will not burn us? When was the last time that you heard that you are precious, and honored, and that the Holy One loves you? It is all true. Our God loves loving.

The scene plays out differently in Luke's gospel, yet the message is consistent. As the crowds have gathered to receive the baptism of John, Jesus also takes his place in the multitudes. After being washed in the river like so many others, Jesus prays. In this moment of prayer, the "heavens 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.'" What must that supreme affirmation have meant to Jesus as he stepped out, beginning his time of public ministry? How those words must have sustained him, maybe a mantra he repeated to himself in the darkest days. What would it be like for you and for me to hear that message: that we are well-pleasing, and that we are indeed be-loved of God? It is all true. Our God loves loving.

On this day of Annabelle's baptism, we listen [ears] and hear this child named as one of God's own, never to be abandoned to the floodwaters, a beloved one welcomed into the embrace of God. And if we are listening with ears of the heart [heart], we hear our own names called as well, and the promise repeated in our inner-most soul, that not one of us will be abandoned, that we are redeemed. We hear that along with Annabelle baptized this day, we also receive the blessing of God, and each of us hears that we are beloved. It is true. Our God loves loving.

In Marilynne Robinson's book *Gilead*, she crafts the story of a minister looking back at his life. As he knowingly approaches his own death, he recalls a story from early in his childhood of baptizing a litter of kittens with a boyhood friend. (He was a preacher's kid himself, PKs apparently do this kind of thing.) "I still remember," he says, "how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily (a blessing). It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that." (*Gilead*)

He's right. It is true. There is power in blessing. And he was also right to see as a boy that that power didn't have to have anything to do with ordination. Anyone of us can claim this power to bless, to acknowledge the sacredness in those we meet. And every one of us can claim that we are blessed by God, given to know our beloved status in this world as creatures whom God loves and whom God has redeemed and whom God will never abandon. We remember that God loves loving, and that we are called to see ourselves and others as be-loved.

So, in these baptismal moments, played out in real-time in Annabelle's life today, we acknowledge the sacredness of her life. Some of us remember our own baptisms or those of children we know and love, some of us may be wondering what this ancient ritual has to do with modern life. If I

might venture a humble suggestion, that there is a reality in blessing, a power in baptism, in which we come to know ourselves as beloved, and this truth is not our own private treasure, but the truth is that everyone around us, everyone we meet is blessed and beloved in the eyes of God. If there is anything our modern lives can learn from these ancient rituals and historic writings it is this crucial truth that God loves loving. It is the reminder that we have nothing to be afraid of, +for we are redeemed; we have been called by name, we are God's. When we pass through the waters, God will be with us; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm us; when you or I walk through fire we shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume us. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior ... Because we are precious in his sight, and honored, and God loves loving." And if there is any new practice we might take forward from these very old traditions, it is the practice of blessing, of saying to each other, something like "you are my beloved child, friend, husband, neighbor, with you I am well-pleased." I can't recommend baptizing kittens, but I can heartily endorse blessing each other, and perhaps even getting the hang of saying something like, "you are my child, you are beloved, with you I am well-pleased." There is as the old minister in the story suggested extraordinary power in these words. The world as we know it in 2010 needs to know this power. We must repeat the ancient story, we must perform the traditional practices in these modern days. Because it is so true that God loves loving.

Our world could use a lot of things, but what I believe our loving God wants most of all for us and for this creation is to remember the promise of blessing and to claim our be-lovedness. Then, we must share the news that it is true that what God loves most is loving, loving. Let's tell the world.