**January 13, 2019**

**Luke 3:15-22**

 The story of Jesus’ baptism is one of few stories where the Triune God shows off for everyone to see. It is one of those miraculous, magical stories that we wish would repeat itself every day and every Sunday. We want to see God and know God and experience God’s glory and power in our own lives. We want to read about it in the daily news and hear about it on podcasts.

 I grew up with an Episcopalian mother and a Methodist father. Two Protestant traditions who have very different experiences and expressions of God’s glory. When we worshipped with my mother’s family, we saw ornate stained-glass windows, rich velvet kneelers, and gold-threaded clergy vestments. Episcopalians bring colorful, beautiful, ornate things to worship to remind people of God’s glory and special-ness. Methodists, on the other hand, don’t place much focus on outer expressions of glory; they are looking for inner experiences of God’s glory: a heart strangely warmed by God’s voice in prayer, tears that testify to the Spirit’s song in your heart, regular attendance at all the weekly meetings and service opportunities. These things showed that you knew God’s glory from the inside out.

 Of course, I grew up in an area with many a Baptist and Pentecostal who showed God’s glory in very different ways from what I was accustomed to. There were healings and revivals and snake handling. I’ve been prayed over in tongues. I’ve been anointed with oil. I’ve seen preachers spout hellfire and damnation, then weep and beg the congregation to get on their knees in confession. All done as a way to show God’s almighty glory to the world.

 It would be rare to hear someone speaking in tongues in one of our Presbyterian worship services here at Sweet Hollow. It would be equally uncommon for us to see someone healed from their diseases or lying prostrate on the ground as they confessed their sins. But that’s ok. Because big, bold dramatic scenes are not the only way you can see God’s glory. We believe that God’s glory still streams around us here – in silent majesty, in comforting presence, in steadfast community. Glory is contained in the small, grace-filled miraculous parts and pieces of our days.

 According to the prophet Isaiah, we are walking in streams of glory each and every day. “I have redeemed you. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned… because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and beloved.” So when we go from place to place, when we face daily challenges and potential threats, we are cloaked in God’s glory – protecting us and redeeming us – because we are God’s beloved. It is as though God’s glory is a Hazmat suit that blocks the inglorious material from getting to us. The God who created everything on earth also created us and knows us and loves us and soaks us in God’s own glory before we go out and roam around the world. God zips us into a glorious suit of life.

We may not see God’s glory spinning gold around our fingers. We may have doubts and questions about who God is and where God is and what God is doing, but God never loses sight of who we are or what we need. God knows every hair on our head. God knows every thought in our mind, every hope in our hearts, every distraction at play. We are God’s children, planted with seeds of our Creator’s glory.

Marianne Williamson famously said: “We ask ourselves, ‘who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”

We are God’s children. All of us – clergy and everyday folk, saints and sinners alike. And our primary identity and jobs are the same: to be God’s children, shining forth God’s glory in the world. That should be what drives us every day and keeps us going. We could walk with confidence and authority knowing that we are God’s children steeped in God’s glory. For as we live into that identity, we encourage others to do so, too.

Learning and understanding who you are, and whose you are (what tribe you belong to) is a shared experience for every creature around the world. A person’s identity is among the first things we teach newborns – “Mama” and “Daddy” who love them and take care of them, their own name and face which are different from others they see and hear. And as we grow, we ask bigger and deeper questions about ourselves. ‘Who am I” can be defined by your favorite color, the school you attend, the awards you earn, the places you go, the books you read, or the people you love. Or it could be some other scientific, psychological description of the group of cells that make up you. Your identity is as high and wide as you have time to think about it. So just as we teach our littlest ones foundational identity markers, we teach them “Jesus Loves Me” along with their name. We teach them “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” along with the names of their neighbors. We cultivate our identity as child-of-God from the very beginning.

Once you know your identity, you can go forth into the world and survive and succeed. You can follow your dreams and invest in your passions. You can do the jobs that you were meant to do (as opposed to the jobs that your neighbor was meant to do).

 Within the Gospels, we see Jesus learning about himself from the first moments of life. He knows he is loved when people traveled to see him, bringing gifts from afar. He knows he is worthy when he stood in the temple debating scripture at a young age. He knows he is claimed when God’s voice breaks open the heavens saying at his baptism, “This is my beloved.” “Jesus does not begin his ministry until first he is told who he is, and to whom he belongs.” [[1]](#footnote-1) “Thus says the Lord… I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Is 43:1) “You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We, too, must understand who we are and whose we are before we can truly love and serve God. Presbyterians follow Jesus’ model in practicing public baptism, wherein we stand before a crowd of believers. We hear God’s loving words over us. The waters roll down over us, then we are charged to go out and follow Christ – at *whatever* age we were baptized (even while most Presbyterians are still infants!). A beautiful baptismal prayer from the French Reformed Church celebrates this recognition of Christian identity at such a tender age:

 Little one, for you Jesus Christ came into the world:

For you he lived and showed God’s love;

For you he suffered the darkness of Calvary

And cried at the last, “It is accomplished;”

For you he triumphed over death

And rose in newness of life;

For you he ascended to reign at God’s right hand.

All this he did for you, little one,

Though you do not know it yet.

And so the word of Scripture is fulfilled:

“We love because God loved us first.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

So we are presented with God’s glory at the baptismal fount, then sent out into the world to learn and love and live and serve. Many of us have no recollection of the moment or the day when those waters ran over our heads. Most of us cannot remember the glory streaming round us. Some of us then wonder how we can possibly live into promises made on our behalf, with no way of knowing the shape our lives would take. Who would have known that this baptized child would drop out of youth group? Who would have known that this baptized child would be diagnosed with depression and bi-polar disorder? Who would have known that this baptized child would bring angst and division to every relationship? If the church had known the rest of the story on the day of baptism, would they still have brought this child forth? Would they be deemed worthy of God’s glory?

There is a heavy weight associated with living into one’s baptism. For no one’s life – in its entirety – is a picture of purity or simplicity or righteousness. No one’s life looks as God would like it to be. Martin Luther knew this, though, and was reassured in God’s goodness and God’s glory in thinking about the state of who we are. When he became discouraged and depressed by conflicts, he would reportedly say, “But I have been baptized.” The tempter would say, “Luther, you’re a hopeless, stubborn, prideful, ignorant, arrogant, no-good sinner,” to which Luther would reply, “True enough, devil, but I have been baptized.”

When bad days come. When depression keeps us in bed. When bank accounts are empty and our needs are many. When children are crying and leaders are fighting, we remember that our hope is in the Lord. For we are God’s children. And we have been sealed in God’s glory through baptism.

This is my prayer for Sweet Hollow this year. It is my “New Year’s Resolution” for the church, if you will. I pray that we would trust the glory streaming round us, whether we can see it or not. I pray that we would depend on the glory pouring forth, whether we feel it or not. When our Sunday School is full and empty, when our bank accounts are shabby and sufficient, when our house is falling down and standing proud, I pray that we will shine with Christ’s light. For as we do so, we will share God’s light and glory with others. They will hear our stories and see our work, and join us in our work. We know who we are. Now is the time to get to work. Now is the time to walk with God into a wonderful, sacred space. So do not say, “I can’t. We shouldn’t. I don’t know how. There is no guarantee.” As Mary Poppins would say, “Pish posh!” You are a child of God, meant to shine with God’s glory. **We** are God’s people. “Thus says the Lord… I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Is 43:1) Indeed, “You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Matthew Skinner, Connections, Year C Volume 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order*, 1996 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)