

Genesis 1:1-5 ~ Luke 3:21-22
 "How Does a Weary World Rejoice? - We Trust our Breakthrough Belovedness"
 Baptism of the Lord ~ Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism ~ January 7, 2024
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Introduction

If you made it to the age of 10 years old in Jesus' time, you could expect to live only into your late 40's or early 50's. Given the shorter life expectancy in the days of Jesus, did you ever wonder why he waited until he was 30 years old to begin his ministry? (Luke 1:23). And you thought the "gap year" or years, was a recent invention! And you also may wonder why then? What provoked or inspired Jesus to leave his carpenter's tool belt behind and get going on his Savior/Messiah gig? To be honest: no one *really* knows the answer to this question.

What we *do know* is *how* he began his work: by standing in line and getting baptized with other people by the bank of the river Jordan. Unlike his birth story, that is only recorded in Matthew and Luke, Jesus' baptism is found in *all four gospels*. That's right: this is the only one of our four "Epiphany" stories told in Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. The visitation of the Magi or Wisemen is an Epiphany only recorded in Matthew, and the fourth epiphany story, Jesus changing the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, was only recorded in John. We can surmise that today's story, the Epiphany at Jesus' Baptism, in the first century CE, was clearly the most important, universally recognized moment of epiphany or revelation, a flash of showing of a startling truth. Indeed, this very human looking man called Jesus, with fish nibbling at his toes as he stood in the river, and mosquitoes buzzing around his face, was truly God come down to be with us, among us. God, as One of us.

Before I read our two-verse gospel lesson, notice two things that are unique to Luke's version of this story. (1) The absence of John the Baptist in this moment when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. In Luke, Herod had already shut John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin and forerunner, in prison. So, *who* actually baptized Jesus is a question, or perhaps not important to Luke. Maybe Luke is teaching us that John's imprisonment was a catalyst for Jesus' to begin his work. And (2), unique to Luke's telling of Jesus' baptism story is that heaven opened *when Jesus was praying*. Think about that for a moment. Never underestimate the breakthrough power of prayer.

As I read our gospel text, open your ears to what Luke is teaching us today. Note the details that are profoundly present: a breakthrough moment and message for Jesus on Day 1. And for us, every day we have ears to hear it.

Sermon

Okay: I know you are *trying* to pay attention to this sermon. However, as much as you love Jesus, you Green Bay Packer fans may find it hard to concentrate as you anticipate the final game of the season this afternoon. Yes: the "Win-and-in" matchup with the Chicago Bears at 3:25 P.M. Very exciting. And maybe scary. Funny thing: Five years ago today, the title of my

Epiphany sermon was, "When Love Breaks Through..." Here in 2024, that may be a headline we hope to see in tomorrow's papers about today's game. Go Pack Go!

Right now, this morning we have the chance to experience, perhaps in a new way, the Love of God, that first broke through at the dawn of creation. The Light of God that shines in the darkness, nor does the darkness overcome it. No matter the score. You may have noticed that we have switched out the dark blue night paraments of Advent for white ones on the communion table, the pulpit, the lectern. And I switched out my black robe that I wore throughout Advent to my white robe to symbolize our new season of Epiphany! When we recognize Christ, the Light of the World breaking through our darkness. Something we surely could use today, yes?

Have you ever noticed how our descending dove window is kind of actually divebombing down on us? I love that about our window. God breaking through our defenses and our pretenses. As Zechariah put it in Luke 1:78-79, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will *break* upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

From this baptism of the Lord story, comes good news for us all. As God told Jesus, before he was about to be led into 40 days by himself in the wilderness to be tested: *You are my beloved Son. And with you and I am well pleased.* Before Jesus had even begun his ministry. No matter how many "gap years" Jesus may have waited to get going. In the very making and existence of God's son, Jesus: God was well pleased.

This is God's message to each of us as well. God created this world and everyone in it, good. In the making of you, God is well pleased. I wonder if we really took this to heart and believed in our belovedness, how might this change our approach to this new year? Anybody make new year's resolutions for 2024? Hands? I think most of us do it in one way or another. I want to share with you an alternative take on this business of New Year's resolutions: a New Year's blessing from Lutheran (ELCA) Pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber, that starts from our place of inherent goodness and goes like this:

As you enter this new year, as you pack away the Christmas decorations and get out your stretchy pants, as you face the onslaught of false promises offered you through new disciplines and elimination diets, as you grasp for control of yourself and your life and this chaotic world - May you remember that there is no resolution that, if kept, will make you more worthy of love. Yearly reminder: there is no resolution that, if kept, will make you more worthy of love. There is no resolution that, if kept, will make life less uncertain and allow you to control your aging parents and your teenage children and the way other people act.

So this year (as every year), may you just skip the part where you resolve to be better do better and look better this time. Instead, may you give yourself the gift of really, really low expectations. Not out of resignation, but out of generosity. May you expect so little of yourself that you can be super proud of the smallest of accomplishments. May you expect so little of the people

in your life that you actually notice and cherish every small, lovely thing about them. May you expect so little of the service industry that you notice more of what you do get and less of what you don't and then just tip really well anyhow. May you expect to get so little out of 2024 that you can celebrate every single thing it offers you, however small. Because you deserve joy and not disappointment. So, I wish you a Happy as possible New Year.ⁱ

Another way of saying this in just two words is this: "Try softer." That's right: as therapist Aundi Kolber has suggested, rather than trying harder and harder: "try softer." We do this by resisting the usual impulse to push our way forward and into a better self and instead surrender first into God's grace and mercy and call to follow God's way of love. The irony is that if we "try softer" this approach will lead us into better relationships and into a better world. And it will help us ride through the waves of pain that life inevitably brings. Pain that some of us in this room may be feeling acutely today: pain of grief, heartache, and/or body aches we just can't get by or over. When we give ourselves permission to "try softer" in this way we remain attuned to our own experiences and connect to our truest selves. We are able to move toward wholeness and peace, open to what may come. Essentially, "trying softer" will help us grow in resiliency.ⁱⁱ

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? One summer when I was in college, I worked at the Grand Teton National Park, on staff with A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, to help lead interdenominational services in the campgrounds on Sundays and on the weekdays worked a concession job, as a supervisor of maids at the Jackson Lake Lodge, making sure the maids were getting the rooms cleaned properly. They actually called the job, "Inspectress." (It was the 1970's.) Preferring to avoid conflict, I would often just fix little problems myself rather than bring them to the attention of the maid who had cleaned the room in question. But there was one maid who seemed to *never* clean the mirrors in any of her rooms. They were consistently smudged and dirty. So, one day I got up my courage to point out this problem to her. She teared up and said she couldn't clean the mirrors because she hated to look at herself. She didn't like what she saw in the mirror.

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? I have good news for you: when God looks at you, God sees a beloved child. When God looks at you, God is well pleased in the existence and being of you. You are God's amazing, one-of-a-kind creation. No matter how you feel about yourself, no matter what has been done to you, or by you. What is your resistance? How are you deflecting right now? Yes, but...

Did you notice that God broke through, the heaven opened, while Jesus was praying. Yes, the Divebombing dove happened when Jesus was praying. What does that teach us? Yes: Praying opens the portal between heaven and earth. The prayer life of Jesus is especially important to Luke – at nine different junctures in Luke's gospel, Jesus is presented in prayer. Want more breakthroughs from God this year? Pray more. A one-word prayer is enough. That's right! You don't need something long and complicated. It can be the word, "help," or "courage" or "patience" or "hope." Just let one word focus and free the log jam you may be feeling. One word can help center (and recenter) your spirit.

Beloved Community: let's try *softer*, pray more often, one word will do. And trust your belovedness in God's eyes. As Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed titled this poem: it's the bravest thing you can do.

The Bravest Thing We Can Do by Rev. Sarah Are Speedⁱⁱⁱ

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.

ⁱ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "A Blessing for the New Year: An Annual Reprisal," December 31, 2023, from thecorners@substack.com.

ⁱⁱ Aundi Kolber, *Try Softer: A Fresh Approach to Move Us Out of Anxiety... and into a Life of Connection and Joy*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), pp. 212-213. As quoted in Center for Action & Contemplation, *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations*, 1/4/24.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah (Are) Speed, "The Bravest Thing We Can Ever Do," *Sanctified Art Advent Devotional: How Does A Weary World Rejoice?* Baptism of the Lord, p. 47.