Beloved

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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I trust your holidays have been good. Seven adults and four children have shared our house for the last ten days and we’ve had more fun than we should be allowed to have! I know very well when we gather like this on Sunday morning, some of us have been in a lovely place and others have been in a lonely place or a very difficult place. My mentor, Jim Tozer, used to summarize the Book of Psalms in this single sentence: “We walk together in hard and pleasant places and in every place, we know the reality of the God who loves us.” It’s that love that we are going to talk about this morning. We are still in the beginning stages of our study of the wonderful Gospel according to Luke and encourage you to be reading it along with us. Today, in Luke Chapter 3, we look at a dramatic moment in the life of Jesus, his baptism by John the Baptist.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” In addition to this account from Luke, we read that Matthew describes the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and actually landing on Jesus. Mark doesn’t just say the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended, but the heavens were torn open, the word translated “torn” meaning ripped apart, rent asunder. For Jesus, it was high drama as God his Father has something of the greatest significance to say to Jesus, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.” It was the ultimate affirmation of a parent to a child!

We have a wonderful men’s Bible study and a women’s Bible study that meet Monday evenings. A few weeks ago, I told the men’s group of a story about James Boswell, who is famous for his biography of Dr. Samuel Johnson written some 200 years ago. One day, Boswell's father took Boswell on a fishing trip with him. They had a pretty good time because Boswell's father taught him some things he never forgot on that fishing trip. In fact, Boswell was so influenced by that trip that for the rest of his life he talked about it. One day, years afterward, someone wondered what was in Boswell's father's mind when he took his son
fishing that day. He found Boswell's father's personal diary and looked up the day on which they'd gone fishing and there the father had written "Gone fishing with my son. A day wasted." Unbelievable, isn't it? I went on many fishing trips with my Dad. We loved to be together and I knew he loved me. Boswell’s father seemed to have no sense of the meaning of “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased!”

God, the Father Almighty, was very clear about His love for His son. He said the words and meant the words that every child needs to hear from her or his mom and dad or another loving adult: “You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.” We typically end each year reflecting on the events of the past year and making various resolutions as we anticipate the year that is to come. How about a change this time? Instead of thinking about what you did or what you want to do, let’s just concentrate on this: that you end this year and start the new one knowing that you are incredibly loved, you are beloved.

When God said, “This is my beloved son,” the words are literally “This is the son of my love.” The word used is *agape*, the Greek word for love, which is understood to mean unconditional love, the love that loves you no matter what you’ve done, no matter what you’ve become. There is a sense in which *agape* has nothing to do with emotion. It’s a no matter how I feel about you, sad, mad or glad, I will always be with you kind of love. However, the form of *agape* that is used here by God the Father, “You are the son of my love (*agape*),” speaks with the sense of endearing tenderness and affection. “How dear you are to me.” So when God the Father says, “You are my beloved son,” he is looking Jesus in the eye saying, “I love you.” It’s what my friend Randy Collins says when speaking to his children: “I love you more than I love my next breath.” When Jesus spoke to God his father, he used the term *abba*, which simply means, “daddy.” This parent and child loved one another immensely and deeply!

There was once a classic cartoon that showed a young pastor looking down in the crib at his infant son and thinking to himself, “How is God’s little sermon illustration doing this morning?” I can only say, “Yup!” I vividly recall the birth of each of our three children. There was a point in the delivery room after Ann Marie’s long labors were over when the doctors finished their various procedures and Ann Marie held each child. Eventually, it was my turn. When Lee was born, I guess I had no idea what to expect. I’d had no experience with newborn babies. Ann Marie’s younger brother was born when she was 15 years old so she was more than prepared.

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1 Gordon MacDonald *The Effective Father* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House 1983).

2 [http://biblehub.com/thayers/27.htm](http://biblehub.com/thayers/27.htm)
So, I thought I’d be drawn to their tiny toes or the overall amazement of this micro-human being but every time there was this freeze frame moment when the baby looked at me in the eye and our eyes locked. Those three “freeze-frame” moments are emblazoned in my memory, forever. When the heavens tore open and God said, “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased,” what he just said was how I was feeling looking at Lee and then Lindsay and Shelley! Elizabeth Stone said a marvelous thing when she wrote, “The decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your own heart walking around outside your body!” Every parent feels that way about every child, and how God the Father Almighty feels about His son.

In the first verse of the Gospel of John we read, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” The phrase “the Word was with God,” in the original language, is literally pros ton theon, which translates “toward the God.” The sense isn’t “with” like side-by-side, but “with” in that they were facing one another. So, the Word, Jesus, was face-to-face with God as they were loving one another, enjoying one another, communicating with one another. The “freeze-frame” moment that has lasted from eternity past and will last forever. What an incredibly intimate, loving, wonderful, and ongoing relationship there is between God the Father and God the Son.

Back in the 1980s, there was a great gathering of Christians seeking renewal called the Congress on Renewal. Pete James was there and I was there, although we hadn’t met yet. One evening, the sermon was on the story of the Prodigal Son. I wish I recalled the name of the preacher; however, he explained how the boy demanded his inheritance from his Dad and took off for the far country where he ended up feeding pigs after his reckless spending. He comes to his senses and decides to go home. We read in the Gospel of Luke, …and he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him (Luke 15:20).

The preacher’s focus was on the phrase, while he was still a long way off, his father saw him. How is it that the father saw him? He was watching, waiting. As the son approached his home, the father’s eyes were searching for him, eyes that had locked with this child’s eyes in their own “freeze-frame” moment, when he was an infant. The eyes of God the Father look at Jesus with pure love and because you, too, are a child of God, God the Father’s eyes look at you in just the same way. Even if you are in the far country, you find yourself in a not-good place, a place of suffering, sin or heartache, the Father’s eyes are waiting, watching and loving you.
We can find ourselves in a “far place” simply as we cope with the challenges that come our way. Clara Null, a young mom wrote: “It was one of the worst days of my life – the washing machine broke down, the phone kept ringing, my head ached, the mail brought a bill I had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, I lifted my one-year-old into his highchair, leaned my head on his tray, and began to cry. Without a word, my son took the pacifier out of his mouth and stuck it in mine.” Life has its ups, and life has its downs, and sometimes we just need someone to lift us up, to show us unconditional, endearing love. If you find yourself in a hard place, the far country, God is watching with loving eyes and waiting for you to turn to Him. Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the penalty for all your sin has been removed. If you confess and admit your sin to Jesus and commit to follow him, God looks at you and sees you clothed in Jesus without flaw or failure, his beloved child, with whom he is well pleased.

A family here at VPC, whom I will call John and Mary, have an amazing practice at Christmas. A former associate of John’s, along with her husband, are a foster care family. For some years at Christmas time, Mary calls to find out how many children the foster family is caring for and she buys for each child a pair of pajamas, a winter coat, ski pants, a hat, boots or shoes, an age appropriate book and three to five Christmas presents. This year when Mary called, her friend said, “This year we have five children and late one evening an officer called to ask if we’d take three more. I said that we already have five but he said the kids had no other place to go so I said all right. About two o’clock in the morning, these three dear little ones arrived with nothing but the clothes on their backs.” So, Mary went out and instead of getting the five pairs of pajamas, winter coats, pants, boots and three gifts for each child she got eight sets for the eight children, ages 10 months to 8-years-old.

The tradition in the foster family is to put the kids to bed Christmas Eve with nothing much under the Christmas tree and to put out all of the presents Mary had brought after the kids are sleeping. Imagine how you would feel if you were six- or seven-years-old and found yourself in a strange home with nothing of your own and no place where people called you beloved. Then, in the presence of warm and loving people when you walked into the room, saw what was under the tree and discovered the many gifts that were for you alone! You would feel beloved. No matter what had happened in your life, you would know that you are beloved. And, indeed, you are beloved. Your Lord loves you deeply, desperately, warmly wonderfully. Whether you live with others or by yourself, it’s easy to feel alone, even unloved, but I am telling you what God the Father

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3 Reader’s Digest
said to Jesus, His son, is what God is saying to every one of His children, *this is my beloved one, in whom I am well pleased.*

I love the story of one John Todd, who “was born in Rutledge, Vermont, into a family of several children in the early 1800s. Both of John’s parents died when he was a very little boy. His relatives wondered what they would do with so many children. They decided to parcel them out among friends and relatives, and one dear and loving aunt said she would take little John. The aunt sent a horse and a servant to get John, who was only six at the time. The servant, Caesar, came and put the little boy on the back of the horse. On the way, an endearing conversation took place:

John: “Will she be there?”
Caesar: “Oh, yes, she’ll be there waiting up for you.”
John: “Will I like living with her?”
Caesar: “My son, you fall into good hands.”
John: “Will she love me?”
Caesar: “Ah, she has a big heart.”
John: “Will I have my own room? Will she let me have a puppy?”
Caesar: “She’s got everything all set, son. I think she has some surprises, too.”
John: “Do you think she’ll go to bed before we get there?”
Caesar: “Oh, no! She’ll be sure to wait up for you. You’ll see when we get out of these woods. You’ll see her candle shining in the window.”

“When they reached the clearing, sure enough, there was a candle in the window and she was standing in the doorway. She reached down, kissed him, and said ‘Welcome home!’ She fed him supper, took him to his room, and waited until he fell asleep. John Todd had come home. [A precious person and a precious place] He grew up to be a great Christian man. His aunt, his new mother’s home, was always a place of enchantment for him. It awed him that she had given him a second home. Years later, long after he had moved away, his aunt wrote to tell him of her impending death. Her health was failing and she wondered what was to become of her. This is what John Todd wrote her:

“My Dear Aunt, Years ago, I left a house of death not knowing where I was to go, whether anyone cared, whether it was the end of me. The ride was long but the servant encouraged me. Finally, he pointed out your candle to me, and there we were in the yard and you embraced me and took me by the hand into my own room that you had made up. After all these years, I still can’t believe it – how you did all that for me! I was expected; I felt safe in that room – so welcomed. It was my room. Now
it’s your turn to go, and as one who has tried it out, I’m writing to let you know that Someone is waiting up. Your room is all ready, the light is on, the door is open, and as you ride into the yard – don’t worry, Auntie. You’re expected! I know. I once saw God standing in your doorway – long ago!”

John Todd discovered someone who deeply believed, “This is a beloved child, with whom I am well pleased!” God sees Jesus as Beloved and God sees you as beloved, too! It’s all you need to know to begin the New Year!

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