

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza  
First Sunday after the Epiphany – January 12, 2025  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In this season after Epiphany, we now sojourn through one of our liturgical in-between times of learning and growing. During these precious few weeks after the joyous celebration of Jesus' nativity and before the stark and challenging work of Lent, we study our Gospel texts focusing on the various stories of epiphany – those times when Jesus' true nature and identity are revealed. Throughout these texts, we are encouraged to wonder: Who is this Jesus? To whom does he belong? To Mary and Joseph of Nazareth or to someone beyond the particularities of space and time? And what does this mean for the rest of us?

It seems that the most important questions in life find themselves rooted in these essential questions of identity: Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? We ask these questions over and over again throughout our lives. Like a new student, who looks out upon a sea of strange faces in the school cafeteria, and wonders where she should sit; which group she should join; and how she will be received. She knew her place at her previous school but is now uncertain again where she belongs and who will claim her as friend.

Or, like a young father, who drives home from the hospital where his wife has just given birth to their first child. The couple fell in love in college and married soon after, very quickly came the beginnings of a career, a home for them to share, and now this... a child. He is awestruck about the miracle that has just occurred and is equally terrified about what it might mean to be a father, when deep-down he still feels a bit of a child himself.

Like a woman, who walks down the quiet hallway in her empty house to look into her daughter's bedroom. The room is filled with souvenirs and trinkets of a full and happy childhood, and of vibrant yet sometimes difficult teenage years, all left behind when she went off to college. Her mother now wonders what lies ahead – who is she now?

Or like an older man who had settled uneasily into retirement, having struggled with losing his identity as a practicing lawyer. He finally finds some solid ground upon which to build his new sense of self when tragedy strikes and his wife of 45 years dies. Alone now and with his children living in far off cities, he no longer feels purpose in his life and he hardly recognizes himself.

Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy?

In our lesson from Isaiah this morning, the Lord is speaking to a demoralized and enslaved band of Israelite exiles in Babylon. They have lost the land promised them by God. They have lost their Temple, the seat of God on earth. They have lost contact with their heritage and are on the precipice of extinction. These are a people who have lost their very identity. As the generations pass, they wonder who they are; where do they belong; what is the source of their worthiness?

The Lord knows this and, through the prophet Isaiah, he speaks to them:

*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.*

Has a more beautiful fatherly love song ever been written? God assures these beaten down, confused, and enslaved people: “You are precious in my sight. I am your God and you are my children. I have redeemed you and will protect you.”

According to Israel’s law, to be redeemed means to be brought out of bondage by one’s kin, a close member of the extended family. When God redeems Israel, God not only frees Israel from slavery to Babylon, but God also asserts close kinship with them. God declares that these people have a new identity: they are a people claimed, valued, and honored by God. And the source of their worthiness lies not within themselves but within the God who created, loved, and redeemed them.

It is fitting that this lesson is paired today with Luke’s account of the Baptism of our Lord today. For in the waters of baptism, we are cleansed of sin, die to our old allegiances for finding our identity, and are claimed, redeemed, and loved as God’s own children. We are then to live our lives with our identity and worthiness rooted in our relationship with God.

It is remarkable that even Jesus was baptized. While scholars and theologians have argued over the millennia about why Jesus was baptized and what it meant, it seems undebatable that it actually happened. All four Gospels mark Jesus’s baptism in the River Jordan as the beginning of his public ministry, but Luke’s account is distinctive. In it, we are not told the narrative details of the actual baptism. Rather, Luke picks up the story immediately afterward: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was 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.”

As in all the Gospel accounts, the act of baptism finds its importance in what that action leads to: the descending Spirit and the voice of God claiming Jesus as his own. But only in Luke’s account do we have the narrative focus on prayer. Luke carefully notes that Jesus prays after he is baptized and he shifts the experience of the theophany – the manifestation of God – to the practice of prayer rather than the baptismal act itself. It is in this context of prayer that the voice from heaven is spoken directly to Jesus and heard only by him.

Throughout Luke’s gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a man of prayer. Indeed, most of the significant events in this Gospel are prefigured by Jesus praying. Jesus prays before he claims his disciples, before asking them who he is, before his transfiguration, before teaching his disciples how to pray, on the night of his arrest, and even at the moment before his death.

For us as well, prayer matters, for it opens us to the workings of the Spirit. Through prayer, we find our true identity. God claims us in the sacramental act of creation and within the sacraments of the church, but we seek, find, and assume our true kinship with God through our practice and presence of prayer. It is in prayer that we may best be able to realize our true identity and forge a profound and intimate relationship with the God who created and redeemed us.

Lest you worry, prayer doesn’t have to be any one particular thing. And it certainly doesn’t have to be perfect – whatever that means. The catechism in our Prayer Book defines prayer as our “responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.”<sup>1</sup> While there are many formally recognized forms of prayer – such as praise, thanksgiving, penitence, intercession and petition, to name a few – I tend to prefer Frederick Beuchner’s more generous understanding. He writes:

*“We all pray whether we think of it as praying or not. The odd silence we fall into when something very beautiful is happening, or something very good or very bad. The “Ah-h-h-h!” that sometimes floats up out of us as out of a Fourth of July crowd when the skyrocket bursts over the water. The stammer of pain at somebody else’s pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else’s joy. Whatever words or sounds we use for sighing with over our own lives. These are all*

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<sup>1</sup> *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979 (p. 856)

*prayers in their way. These are all spoken not just to ourselves, but to something even more familiar than ourselves and even more strange than the world.”<sup>2</sup>*

In prayer, God not only reveals who we are and to whom we belong, but also God’s great pleasure and delight in us. God’s claiming and declaration of love and pleasure are not merely reserved for Jesus, but for all whom He has made. There are three important messages within God’s words to Jesus that we also need to hear, even, and maybe especially, today:

**You are my child** – we are first and foremost children of God; created to find our essential identity in our relationship with our Creator.

**You are beloved** – we are truly God’s beloved; beloved even while still in the womb, and beloved even when we act in less-than-loving ways.

**I am well pleased with you** – God delights and rejoices in all his creatures and bestows parental blessings upon each one of us. We who are made in the image of God are loved like God’s own children.

These messages may be discovered, experienced, and embraced while in prayer. Other messages may sometimes be found there as well, but many of these are false and are not of God. But if you clear past these untruths born of fear and doubt, you may hear the still, small voice behind, beyond, and below this distracting noise and hear God singing to you: “You are my child, my very own Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/4/25/prayer>