Blessed God, we give thanks for being sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and that we belong to you forever. Amen.

This morning in Church School our children will be hearing the same gospel lesson that we read today, the Baptism of the Lord. In our time and in this denomination of Christianity, most of us have probably been baptized as infants or children, our parents making the decision for us and taking on the responsibility, along with our Godparents, for raising us in the Christian life. I think that is why it is so good that from time to time in our church year we renew our baptismal vows, claiming them as our own.

The opening call and response of the service of Holy Baptism most always takes my breath away. *“There is one Body and one Spirit; There is one hope in God’s call to us; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all.”* **One hope in God’s call to us.** This morning our children will learn of God’s call to us and what name it is that God calls us…Beloved.

Beloved. Jesus hears that name today as the heavens open and the Spirit descends as a dove. Luke’s gospel is very matter-of-fact about what is happening. I think that’s strange given just how much of a build-up Luke gives to the birth of John the Baptist, of Mary and Elizabeth, and the songs of Mary and Zechariah, all of the detail of the birth and the angels and shepherds, even of the precocious child Jesus in the temple with the elders.

In Luke, Jesus stands with all of the others, just another body awaiting the waters. If we were to look on that day, would we even notice his face in the crowd? I wonder if he knows that this is his last moment of anonymity. I wonder if he knows that he is standing at the border, breathing the last few breaths before his public life and ministry begins.

This is definitely a moment of self-surrender, of pure vulnerability, of trust. And Jesus immerges from the waters, not to angelic fanfare, nor to blazing light or thunder, ….but quietly he prays. And the Spirit descends in the form of a dove and a Voice of Love beyond measure declares*…”You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* This is Jesus’ identity and purpose, son and Beloved of God.

Priest and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen writes and preaches beautifully and honestly about identity and purpose in our lives as those God calls the Beloved. *"The core of our faith is the conviction that you and I and we are the beloved daughters and sons of God. One of the enormous spiritual tasks we have," says Nouwen, "is to live a life based on that knowledge."*

It can be an enormous task in these days to hear the voice of the One that calls us beloved. There are so many more that come at us, louder, persistent, seductive. Telling us…we are what we do, we are what others say, we are what we have ….Our completeness will come if only ….. we have more – more success, more popularity, more power. Isn’t that what Satan tempted Jesus with in the wilderness? Use your power…Turn these stones to loaves or bread. You can have all these kingdoms of the earth, I can give them to you; simply worship me. Jump from this high place and the angels will come to save you – show me your power!

Jesus *knows* his identity and purpose. The Beloved, he is sustained by those words, that assurance. – *“One does not live by bread alone.” “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”*

Immersion in the waters of baptism can be risky business. Baptism does not guarantee we are free from challenges and difficulties. Isaiah speaks of it this morning. We may still have to pass through the raging waters and walk through fire. We are not free from trouble, and we are supported, encouraged and named as Beloved, marked as Christ’s own forever. Our BCP (298) describes baptism as *“full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body, the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.”*

We are beloved of a God that looks as tirelessly for us as a woman searching for her lost coin, as a shepherd that will leave an entire flock to embrace that lone, wandering sheep, as a father that welcomes an errant, broken and defeated son with overwhelming joy. We are beloved of a Savior that meets a persecutor of Christians on a road and makes of even him an unapologetic zealot for the risen Lord. We are beloved of a God who knew us before we were knit in our mother’s womb.

Each time we renew our own baptismal vows we stand at the border. Each time we accept our place as beloved children of God we stand at the border. Each time we approach the table together, we stand at the border. It is an act of courage to claim Jesus as Messiah and Savior and our identity and purpose in Him; knowing each other as siblings of beloved community in justice, love and companionship.

*“Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Beloved-ness become enfleshed in everything we think say and do.”* (Nouwen) In his book Life of the Beloved, Henri Nouwen delves into four spiritual movements to knowing who and whose we are as followers of Christ. **Taken, blessed, broken and given.** He says *”These words summarize my life as a Christian, because as a Christian, I am called to become bread for the world: bread that is taken blessed, broken and given….they summarize my life as a human being because in every moment of my life somewhere, somehow the taking, the blessing, the breaking and giving are taking place.”*

I’d like to focus on the notion of blessing by relating a story Nouwen tells about the community in which he lived. It was an intentional community of people living alongside of mentally handicapped adults in Toronto. A woman, Janet, asked him for a blessing. He instinctively made a sign of the cross on her head. *“She protested vehemently, ‘no, that doesn’t work. I want a real blessing.”* Henri acknowledged the ritualistic quality of his response and called her forward for a blessing in the evening worship. She came to him and laid her head on his chest.

He held her and said, *“Janet, I want you to know that you are God’s beloved daughter. You are precious in God’s eyes. Your beautiful smile, your kindness to the people in your house and all the good things you do show us what a beautiful human being you are. I know you are a little low these days and that there is sadness in your heart, but I want you to remember who you are; a very special person, deeply loved by God and all the people who are here with you.”*

Many others came forth that evening asking for and receiving a blessing from within the community. He writes, The Voice says *“You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter, my favor rests on you.”* When we can hear that voice, trust in it, and always remember it, especially during dark times, we can live our lives as God’s blessed children and find the strength to share that blessing with others.

Our tradition in the Episcopal Church is that Baptism it is not a private matter; It happens in community. Jesus got in line with the rest of us. In that solidarity, in the incarnation, he destroys the notion of who is wheat and who is chaff. In Baptism in Christ, we are all welcomed into his Body. The bond in His flesh by God ,through water and the Spirit, cannot be broken. Our children are learning today that in our Baptism we are marked as Christ’s own forever. May we live in that assurance of Beloved-ness.

There is a prayer for the newly baptized in our service that is one of the most beautiful we have in our tradition.

Let us pray..

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised us to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give us a discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen. (BCP, 308)*