

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

*3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 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."*

**Sermon**

I have been noticing a pattern in this new year. There's something shifting that I've not seen before. Around New Year's Eve, posts on social media started popping up about the new year. Every year around this time, I expected to see "new year new you!" or "start those new year's resolutions early," or "how to make those new year's goals stick." I *expected* to see a barrage of posts on social media—the kind that seem to be well-intentioned, but underneath are shaming—when only 8% of those who make New Year's resolutions actually keep them.

But I didn't see the barrage of new year's media like that this year.

Now, I must confess that I am generally underwhelmed by New Years as a holiday. It's a new year, sure, based on the Gregorian calendar we follow. Of course calendars are helpful, but there are many other calendars, and kinds of calendars, that people around the world follow. There's the Hebrew calendar, the Persian calendar, the Chinese calendar, the Greek Orthodox calendar, the Ethiopian calendar, and so many more.

So New Year's, on the widely-used Gregorian calendar, seems a little arbitrary to me. Plus, I also dislike that the new year can bring out society's old habits of self-loathing and consumerism after the holidays. "Buy this athletic wear, do that exercise, change your habits, keep those resolutions you're bound to break, and absolutely rush into the new year even if it means you go so fast you fall right over doing it!"

Friends, I also think we need the new year—after all, every calendar has one! We need a chance to start over. And I saw people starting over. But that old pattern is not what I saw at the change of the year this time. It's not what I'm continuing to hear and see. People seemed to be singing a different tune. (And just to check myself, to make sure I'm not seeing or hearing things that aren't there, I've been documenting it.) Here are some examples of this different—and if I may say so, softer—new year's refrain:

1. A clergy friend of mine, wrote, "perhaps this year's resolve is to heal who I already am. My person does not need fixing or replacing so much as mending and gentle attention" (Meta Herrick Carlson, Instagram).
2. Brit Chida, who creates interactive art on Instagram, wrote on New Year's Day to their followers, saying, "I'm noticing how you've changed over the past year. I love how you have taken in new experiences and softened, reached, spoken up, listened carefully...I hope the movement of time feels like soft breeze to you. And that you have everything you need when it doesn't" (Instagram story).

3. History and civics teacher Sharon McMahon wrote, “2021 was hard. I don’t know what 2022 will bring for you. But I can tell you that you are needed and necessary and that your role here on this one small planet in the universe is of utmost importance. Nothing would be the same without you” (Instagram story).

Did you notice that so many of these statements are centered around gentleness? How they are directed away from selves and instead are wishes for others? They’re not as much resolutions, as they are connections—blessings—almost. They are soft; wishing gentleness for themselves and for others.

There’s much less about “new year, new you,” or about how not to break your resolutions in the New Year. Nothing about “change your body, change your life” because it’s somehow not good enough. I’m not saying goals and new year’s resolutions aren’t out there, the internet and media are a wide vast place. And they aren’t inherently bad! Goals and resolutions for healthy change are important, even necessary for our lives. But it’s as if grace and compassion are bubbling up more in people. Even, or maybe especially, after these very difficult last years.

Friends, I could share so many more examples of what I’ve shared here, because there are that many more examples. And yes, it absolutely might be the social media algorithm! But I also feel like the Spirit is shifting us, or trying to tell us something. Some new different kind of intention.

Author Aundi Kolber said it best, I think when she posted, “a gentle reminder that you don’t have to create a new you—maybe just try softer with the you you already have. We are already so loved” (Instagram). That’s exactly what I keep seeing: people saying to one another, “don’t try harder, try softer this year. Don’t push through when it comes to yourself or others, you’re too precious for that. Have compassion for yourself, and for others.” It’s a different way of being in the world—not in a make it or break it kind of way—rather, in an expansive, generous kind of way. It’s a new posture, a new way of moving through the world. And as we know the simple act of moving through the world can be incredibly hard, and at times nearly impossible, in the midst of a viral surge in a pandemic. But the pattern I keep seeing and hearing is a collective desire to move differently—more tenderly—in the world.

Which brings me to Jesus’ baptism. Born into a kingdom that was so tyrannical that King Herod so feared losing his power and tried to kill Jesus from the start, the world was incredibly hard in Jesus’ day. As I mentioned in *The Chronicle* (our e-newsletter) this week, it was just over two weeks ago at Christmas that Jesus was born into a world. Last week we celebrated the magi arriving and bearing gifts, “offering what they had,” to Jesus, as Pastor Cindy said last week.

This week, he’s grown up. And we see that the Jesus, the Messiah people expected, wasn’t exactly taking the victorious, conquering savior posture. In fact, Christian historian John Dominic Crossan writes that Jesus’ baptism was an ‘acute embarrassment’ for the early church, because he didn’t ascribe to the victorious Messiah image. Why, Crossan says, would the Son of God place himself under the tutelage of a rabble-rouser like John the Baptist? Why would a Messiah need a baptism of repentance?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, chapter 2; Harper Collins, 1989.

Just as the folks I'm seeing on social media aren't posting "new year, new you" posts, just as they aren't taking the posture of pushing through and conquering their goals, Jesus wasn't taking the posture of the long-expected Messiah that John the Baptist and prophets through the ages were going on about.

Our scripture tells us that many of people were being baptized by John around the time Jesus was baptized. We even hear that they were questioning in their hearts, asking themselves if John might be the Messiah. And when Jesus arrives on the scene, instead of coming over the top of them, being righteous or lofty, Jesus' first public act is for solidarity. He chooses to be baptized right alongside the various other people being baptized. Jesus' first act is humble and for the sake of "being with" the people, right next to the others being baptized.

Preacher Debie Thomas says that Jesus baptism is an act "of alignment. Of radical and humble joining. His first step is a step towards us. '...Let it be so at the hands of another,' he decides, indicating that his power lies in his capacity to surrender, to share, and to submit."<sup>2</sup> This gentleness and softness that is bubbling up all over in this new year—this humility and focus on others. Jesus was all about that, too.

There were plenty of reasons people were baptized back then, and lots of baptisms. John talks in our scripture about a baptism of fire, which is always referring to refining, letting go of the things you don't need, becoming more oneself, more fully. My professors Matt Skinner, Rolf Jacobson, and Karoline Lewis talked about how Jesus' baptism—in fact baptism in general back then, like the kind John was doing—was less about getting rid of sin. It wasn't about death and resurrection.

Rather, it was more of a posture. Jesus wanted to approach his life and ministry with a sense of humility, repentance, forgiveness, and so Jesus' baptism was less about his own need to be baptized, and so much more about being with the people, and preparing himself for what was next. What was next was 40 days in the wilderness, followed by a start to his public ministry. He was preparing, Skinner says, in humility and gentleness, while basking in God's love, to do God's work in the world. He was preparing for the work of compassion and aligning himself with the marginalized, vulnerable, and ostracized.<sup>3</sup> Jesus wasn't trying harder; he was trying softer. So that he could bring that gentleness and compassion into his ministry.

And I think that's the refrain I'm hearing too, after 2 years in a pandemic. Perhaps like Jesus, we know now that life is too precious not to notice, and listen, and be gentle with our own healing. That life is too short not to tell people that you love them, or that they are needed and necessary in the world. To lovingly remind people to go gently, and to measure your year in love.

Jesus begins with baptism because he is preparing himself for what he's about to do. To take a posture of love, gentleness, compassion, humbleness in the world will take strength because of the world we live in. It was the world Jesus lived in, too. Jesus starts his public acts as an adult in baptism because he needs to soak up God's love first. He needed to prepare

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, "One of Us," Journey with Jesus webzine, posted 2 January 2022, accessed 5 January 2022, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3285>.

<sup>3</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Karoline Lewis, Matt Skinner, Sermon Brainwave Podcast #823 posted 3 January, accessed 7 January 2022, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcast-type/sermon-brainwave>

himself for a posture of love and gentleness in the world.

Jesus had an inkling that that was exactly what the world needed. A completely different way to be. I think God agreed, as if to reinforce Jesus' posture of aligning with the people, with humility and compassion and love. At the height of the scripture today, we hear that God's voice came from the heavens speaking to Jesus saying, "you are my beloved child. In you I am so pleased." That sheer, utter, belovedness bathed Jesus too, to do what he would do—loving the world as he did.

So let us be reminded as we try softer, as we soothe ourselves and the world with deep loving breaths, as we shift our cycles into peaceful ones, that God doesn't say, "*this* is my beloved child, God says "YOU" are my beloved child. As if to say you, and you, and you, and you...bask in the goodness, the gentleness, the softness of my love. So that you may embody it. The world needs it just as much, if not more, than it needed it more than 2,000 years ago. Align yourself to the oppressed and vulnerable and ostracized. Be soft and gentle with yourself and for those you meet. And remember above all else, that you are God's precious and beloved child. Amen.

### **Benediction**

If you would enter  
into the wilderness,  
do not begin  
without a blessing.  
Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,  
named by the One  
who has traveled this path  
before you.  
Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard  
to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.  
I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you  
from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger  
or thirst,

from the scorching  
of sun  
or the fall  
of the night.  
But I can tell you  
that on this path  
there will be help.  
I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.  
I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road  
such as this,  
that fly to meet us  
bearing comfort  
and strength,  
that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:

**Sermon January 9, 2022**  
**First UCC Northfield**  
**Lauren Baske Davis**

5

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

—Jan Richardson, “*Beloved Is Where We Begin*” from *Circle of Grace*