



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**  
**Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick**  
**Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, January 10, 2021**  
**Sermon Title: "A Community of Beloved-ness"**  
**Sermon Texts: Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**

In January of 1964 I was baptized in Muncie, Indiana, in a school gymnasium because the church didn't have a "real" building yet. I have no physical remembrance of that day to hold onto. What I do have is the memory of people who powerfully loved me, forming my longing to be so beloved. I have every reason to believe that was the work of the Holy Spirit creating such a powerful connection.

In 1994, our daughter, Alex, was baptized in Christ Lutheran Church in Elizabethtown on Reformation Sunday. Amidst all the bells and whistles, and festival worship, I remember receiving the candle, hearing, "let your light so shine" and being encouraged to light that candle each year and remember her baptism. Later that week, our dog ate the candle. That robin egg blue candle box, where the church secretary had lovingly inscribed the names of Alex, the Pastor, parents and godparents, was destroyed. My heart broke. I no longer had that to hold onto. What we do have is the memory of all those who were a community of beloveds for us. Even when that candle box did not exist, those Spirit created moments were no less powerful or real.

In every baptism I have ever assisted or performed, "beloved" is always what comes to mind. The very word that the voice over the water and the wind bear forth at Jesus' baptism. "Beloved" is powerful. It's really a continuation of God's creative work since the dawn of time. All the way back to Genesis, "in the beginning," or as one translator has put it, "When God began to create." God began creating a community of beloved-ness. The voice of the Word moved over the waters and the Wind of the Spirit hovered. Hovering like a mothering bird over a nest, nurturing and creating, God, as the Trinity, fully immersed in creating all that we are and all around us. All out of profound power and profound love.

When Jesus appears at the Jordan to be baptized it is God's visible immersion anew in our world, as the Spirit hovers and the Word is spoken and embodied-"Beloved."

Fast forward to Paul visiting new disciples who they tell him they have been baptized, but at some point it becomes clear to him that they are not speaking of the same thing. So he asks, "Into what have you been baptized?" They don't say anything about the Holy Spirit as a part of their identity, in fact they have never even heard of this Holy Spirit. They think they belong to John the Baptist.

It is then that Paul helps them to understand that since then God has revealed more in Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit immersed in our world, opens the door into a deeper relationship beyond ourselves. As they are baptized in the name of the God who created and redeems them, they are given that Spirit. This is their identity, and within it, they are given the power to embody the Spirit of God's love that can do powerful things in the world.

The question exists for us today: "Into what have WE been baptized?" Let's remember the power of God's love, especially when the things we look to as reminders of God in our lives are not present as we wish or hope. We who are worshipping "in Spirit" as opposed to in person together. Who in days' past, would have identified our community in terms of tangible things- our activities, ministries and programs, beloved hallmarks of being a part of Grace Lutheran Church. Perhaps we wonder who we are now as we look at our world.

AND YET, this Spirit is still binding us as a community of beloveds shining Christ's light in the world. Our baptism into Christ, above all else, is our identity. It signifies being created and grounded in God's love. That is the source of our community and our power for living. Bigger than "being baptized Lutheran" or any other denomination. Bigger than being "baptized by \_\_\_ pastor" or "at \_\_\_ church." Bigger than any other way we identify ourselves, or the labels we use. Those things have meaning, but are not an end unto themselves, any more than for those first disciples being "baptized into John's baptism" was.

God invites us into a more expansive reality. Of being baptized, not into something of our world, but into Christ's kingdom of grace and love. Formed as a community of beloved-ness. This is what God continues to create in and through us.

It is important that Paul asks, " Into what were you baptized?" This word "into" tells us that our baptism is not a surface event. Not just a moment, something we pick up and put down. We are baptized into, immersed into, God's ongoing reality. In our baptism, God has met us there and called us beloved. But our ever-creating God has also drawn us beyond to be in a relationship grounded in grace and love. To be a community of beloved-ness everywhere.

God continues to create, the Word continues to be revealed and the Spirit continues to move in us as we head into God's creative future. Paul elsewhere calls us co-creators with God. Co-creators of a community of beloved-ness in the world. This is our identity grounded in God's power and love.

When we fail, which we do, we should seek repentance and know grace. Then remember anew who should ground our words and actions.

Today, I encourage you to light a candle, and reflect upon God's work begun in your baptism. Look at the light, hear God call you "my beloved" and immerse yourself in those words that are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever. Give thanks for this grace. Take a moment to remember all of the people who have revealed this to you. Maybe make the cross in water on your hand and let everything that is not reflective of your true identity in Christ be washed away.

Now, let me show you what I see in you. These times have been phenomenally challenging, but beloveds, you have been phenomenally loving beacons. Thank you for feeding hungry people, meeting disasters with comfort, lifting those who struggle. For praying, worshipping and serving our Beloved Lord Christ. For persevering in all kinds of challenges. We have created, and recreated, over and over, but you still are giving time, talent and treasure to ensuring that the community of beloved-ness into which we have been baptized, the church of Jesus Christ, has continued on. We are part of God's larger community in Christ "together in Spirit" everywhere we are found.

We may have felt like we were thrown in the metaphorical deep end of the pool, but I hope and believe we see we were met by God who loved and empowers us, discovered ourselves immersed in more grace than we ever imagined, and can be in awe of moments we didn't think could be so beloved.

The world still desperately needs to see God's love and grace embodied, let's immerse ourselves in continuing to show the world a powerful love so desperately needed. Shine that light. Share that love.

In closing, I see our life together like this. Years ago I saw a photo mosaic of Jesus. Up close you could see it was made up of individual pictures of people of all walks of life. As you zoomed out farther, you could see that those pictures formed an eye, a nose, part of a face, and then a full picture of Jesus. It's how I envision our baptism, as co-creators of God's community of beloved-ness reflecting Christ in the world through people far and wide. This is our identity grounded in God's power and love. Within this Spirit, God's love can do real and powerful things. Now in this time, when we wonder who we are and where we are headed, let's hold onto this.  
AMEN.