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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 3:1-23

9 January 2022

## Baptized and Beloved

### *Opening Greeting & Prayer:*

Hutterthal Mennonite Church good morning. Good morning to all of you also who join our service online as I am today. Finally good morning to any and all guests who have chosen to join us today. We are so glad that you are here.

Let us pray: Great creator, you are present to us in this season in the young boy, Jesus. Thank you for the example that you lived in baptism, identity, and repentance. Your grace visits us each time that we remember our baptism, the washing of water that signifies not only the ways that you have cleansed us but also the rising from the water, commemorating the new life that you have called us to. Thank you for welcoming us into your family. In Jesus name. Amen.

*Message:* We are all doing well here in the Koehler household, and we pray that with all of the other illnesses spreading around that you are able to stay safe and healthy in these winter days.

At this same time last year, I shared about my experience of baptism as a young person. In the church calendar, today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany when the wise men visited Jesus as a toddler. We celebrate and study Jesus's experience of baptism today as a reminder of our own baptism. The day of Epiphany was on this past Thursday, so only 3 days ago, a very short time in comparison to how much time would have passed in Jesus's life. In just 3 days in the church calendar, we have glazed over almost 30 years of Jesus's life, depending on exactly

when the magi came. Luke only mentions a single experience at the temple during Jesus's growing-up years, and the rest of the gospels are silent. I can only imagine what kinds of events shaped the worldview of young Jesus of Nazareth as he learned to work with Joseph and continued to visit with his radical relative John. I wonder if John and Jesus visited each other a few times a year, especially with the connection that their mothers already shared. Did Mary and Elizabeth make sure that they were together throughout their childhood? We will never know.

When we enter the scene in Luke chapter 3, much has changed in the world since Jesus was born. The Roman Emperor Augustus has been succeeded by Tiberius. King Herod from the book of Matthew is replaced by his two sons, Herod and Philip. The infamous Pontius Pilate is governor of Judea. According to other writings of the first century, Pilate was a ruthless and calculating leader, quick to crush any opposition to Rome that would make him look weak to his superiors in Rome. Also in Jerusalem with Pilate, the imposters, Annas and Caiaphas, in the high priesthood at this time were not chosen by the people of Israel but by the Roman rulers, selected also to keep the peace and pacify the people on behalf of the empire. It was a volatile time in Judea, brimming with the political and cultural tension of domination and subversion.

We must remember that both John and Jesus give up the roles that they have inherited, another aspect of their lives that we do not hear about. Rather than following his father in working at the temple as a priest, John is wandering the wilderness east of Jerusalem around the Jordan River. John seems to have given up on the temple as the place to meet God and sustain the covenantal relationship. I wonder if John has witnessed the injustice and corruption of the Jerusalem temple first-hand as he grew up learning from his father. What did Zechariah say when John started preaching that the people could receive forgiveness of their sins outside of the temple? Were there repercussions for Zechariah as a member of the priesthood? Maybe

Zechariah had passed away by this time. We just don't know. John is convinced though that God is not moving among the religious leaders or temple priesthood in Jerusalem. God is doing something new in the wilderness as God had done so many years ago in leading the people to the promised land. John has realized his integral part in it as the prophet, heralding the arrival of Messiah. Little does he realize how close he has been to the Messiah this entire time.

John has not only given up on the power available in Jerusalem, but he has also realized that the people's ancestry is not what sustains the covenant between them and God. God could create descendants of Abraham from the stones on the hillsides if God wanted. What distinguishes the true children of Abraham from their blood relatives is forgiveness and authentic repentance. John's baptism was to be a starting point for those who came out to the Jordan River, a new beginning in relationship with God as they lived into the ancient covenant of their people, a newness that helped them get beyond the perpetual exile that they could not seem to escape. But John was not doing this as the Messiah, but in preparing the people for the Messiah's coming. Living into the Messiah's way is what John describes for those who ask him what they should do in response to this baptism. The crowds are to share their resources; the hated and traitorous tax collectors are to collect only the money that is due them, and the despised Roman soldiers are to find contentment in what they have, rather than what they could get by taking advantage of the people. Jesus is baptized among the unexpected and overlooked at the river.

According to John, the Messiah's baptism, rather than in water, will be an immersion in the very breath and fire of God. The breath, the Holy Spirit, will bring new life to all people, for all flesh will see the salvation of God, while the fire will refine each person to what God has desired for them and created for them all along. It doesn't take long though before people in power begin to notice John's activities in the wilderness. As the prophets of ancient Israel also

did, John calls King Herod to account for taking his brother's wife and perpetrating other evil actions. Herod puts John in prison, providing the room for Jesus to step into the vacuum that has been created, but Jesus does not continue preaching and baptizing in John's stead. Jesus discerns his own path by spending some time alone in the wilderness as the ancient people of Israel had once done. Then after his time is complete, Jesus walks back to Galilee, where his hometown is, to continue spreading the message of God's kingdom come.

Yet after telling us of John's imprisonment, the gospel writer takes us back to a special moment that John and Jesus share at the Jordan River. Jesus joins John's movement, walking several days from his home in Nazareth to where John is baptizing in the wilderness of Judea. Maybe Jesus was one of John's disciples until John was thrown in prison. We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus joins with John's claim that what is happening in Jerusalem is corrupted and completely unlike what God desires for God's covenant people, so Jesus is baptized. Something magnificent happens, in the gospel of Luke's account, after Jesus has come up from the water and is praying along the river. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus, a sign of the special presence and power that Jesus will use in the coming months of ministry. Not only that, but a voice from heaven affirms the status of this young man from Nazareth as God's son, the beloved, with whom God is well-pleased. Before Jesus does any miracles or preaches in any synagogues; before Jesus heals anyone or stands up for those who are powerless; before Jesus walks the lonely road to the cross or has the last supper with his closest followers, God assures him of his identity as God's child. Living into his identity then as the Messiah and son of God was what followed in Jesus's ministry.

When we are baptized, we too receive this grace of God's empowering presence and God's claim on us as beloved children. When was the last time that you heard God speak over

you, “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.” I believe that when you were baptized, God affirmed this in you as God’s image-bearer and co-heir with Jesus of the promise of the kingdom. Just as it was for Jesus, our baptism is a statement and a launching point. It is a statement of our identity and our status: a beloved child of God. Baptism is a launching point into discerning what God has called us to, how the breath and fire of God will empower us and refine us into who God has created us to be. Were these the words that you heard God speaking over you on your baptism? I challenge you as we begin a new year to stand in your identity as unconditionally loved and named a child of God, knowing that God loved you and sought you out before you accomplished or attempted anything. Just as we talked about last week, the relationship that God offers each of us is a gift of grace; the love and care that envelope us as God’s children are gifts of grace. Receive them and walk in them, knowing that God has spoken over you and to you, “This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.”

*Closing Prayer:* Let us pray. almighty creator, empower us today to live into our identity as your beloved children. Please give us the strength to release the guilt and shame that seek to bind us and render us paralyzed. Free our minds, hearts, and bodies to imagine more deeply and creatively your will and way in your in-breaking kingdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.