

“In the Water With Us” based on Luke 3:15-22 and Isaiah 43:1-7

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 9, 2022 at Shelby Presbyterian Church

This past Wednesday, we celebrated my son Harrison’s sixth birthday. Two of his best little buddies were with us, as we played hide and seek, watched Wild Kratt movies, ate pancakes and pizza, made cookies, and more. It was a busy time. The day culminated in our painting of the rock outside Jefferson School, announcing for the world to see, or at least his whole school to see, that Harrison, with his initials HFJM, is now six years old.

Our first child is growing up so fast, too fast it seems, and yet I still can’t wait to see how he and Josephine will help make this world a better place. Throughout their lives, I want them to know, first and foremost, that they are loved, unconditionally by God, and by us.

I want them to read or hear a passage like the one we read from Isaiah, and when they come to those words, *‘Do not be afraid...You are mine...I love you,’* I want them to hear both God’s voice and ours and internalize it. I want the words from Luke’s gospel to ring true with them as well, *‘You are my child, my beloved, and in you I am well pleased.’* I want them to know these words express our love for them and they express God’s love for them as well.

But if I’m honest, I know that being a parent is hard, and this is no easy task. Likewise, as a pastor, I know that this message in its truth, is difficult to comprehend, partly because no parent is, or has ever been a perfect parent, as hard as we try, and so, we struggle to understand God as parent and with it, God as Trinity. I get that struggle. I had a strained relationship at times with my father, whose love was obvious only in the last few years of his life, but at times before then, felt elusive and even scarce.

We may not all have kids, but every single one of us has had parents, and each one of us, has seen the struggles and the failures of even the best, but still imperfect parents. It makes it hard to grasp the amazing, exuberant, overflowing love of God, primarily because it is hard for us to love one another in this way. Yet, what we see in these beautiful words of scripture today, is an image of God’s self-giving love, revealing the triune God in and over the waters, in solidarity with us and filled with love for us.

My favorite part of the Hebrew Scriptures may just be the middle part of the book of Isaiah. It is the incredible poetry we find in chapters 40-55, centering on the suffering servant – who represents both Israel and God, prefiguring Jesus. You see, there are moments in which it seems Isaiah speaks of the people, and the coming escape from exile in Babylon, and that is there, but then the prophet also points to something more, an individualized portrait of this suffering servant, who is the arm, or power of God, One with God, yet in human form, to suffer on behalf of, and in the place of God’s people.

And so, the prophet’s words of comfort and love, are expressions both for this individual, and also, for the corporate Israel. It goes beyond the descendants of Jacob, as these chapters point to Israel and the Servant’s role as a light to all nations, a revelation of God’s sovereignty over all creation and love for all people, just as God had promised to Abraham and Sarah many

years earlier. The passage we read today makes promises for the future, and also recalls God's earlier deeds for Israel.

These words point to the Lord freeing Israel from bondage to Egypt and empire in the Exodus, and gives the promise of the return of exiles from Babylon and then also from beyond, but not because they have earned anything, but simply because God loves them. *"Since you were so highly valued in my sight, you have been honored. I love you,"* God says.

The value of God's people is not a value placed on them by the world. It is not a value they have added to themselves by their actions or religiosity. It is not the value of what they have acquired or what they have achieved. Their value is – in and of itself – simply God's love for them. This value is in the eyes of a God who is complete already, who does not need people, but still calls us by name, redeems us to know this love. God claims us and tells us: I love you.

And so, the passage today from Luke, in a scene that is in all four gospels, and it presents for us the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, Jesus, receiving the words of affirmation, revealing that the servant, the arm of God, is in the water with the people. He is with the crowds, as Luke describes them consistently. And like in Isaiah, Luke signifies that the message is to be extended, because in this moment, when God is revealed as a Trinity, the humanity of Jesus, though sinless, is baptized. The emphasis for Luke isn't on John the Baptizer, but on the people in the water with Jesus, who see the Spirit visible as a dove, and hear the Father's voice, *"You are my Son, my beloved. In you I am well-pleased."*

I love this scene because it presents for us God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one moment. I love this scene because this revelation brings God down to the people in the water. It reveals the Trinity, but not as a mystery that we cannot hope to understand, but as the concrete revelation of the eternal Father loving the eternal Son, in and through the eternal Holy Spirit. And it does so in a moment of actual time when heaven opened into creation and God came through.

Here is why I care so much about the Trinity – it is the reason I believe that the statement in scripture that "God is love" is true. You see, if God were solitary, and the Son and Spirit were just ways of seeing God, then creation would be necessary for God to have something to love. If he needed creation, would it be love? This creates a picture of a lonely God in need of something to do, more akin to other creation stories where gods created to exploit it.

And if the Son and Spirit were creations of the Father before time, or even just less than the Father, then creation and authority would be the ultimate purpose of God's plan and not love. Therefore, a loving redemption of humanity would be pointless, because God could destroy everything and just create something else. However, scripture is pretty clear that God's plan is redemption, a redemption based on a God who loved us first.

The Trinity of three co-equal and co-eternal persons in one God with one will and one nature, reveals for us a God who for all eternity before creation was already complete and loving. This is not a binary God like a closed off couple, that cannot see anyone else. No, this is a

triune God of shared love, like a family. And so, it makes sense that this love would pour out to begin creation, not because God needs creation, but because God shares this love, God shares freedom and God shares creativity, all of which, give us a share of God's own life and being, as creatures made in God's own image.

Ancient and modern-day theologians and writers have described the Trinity as a dance. I like this image of a dance of three persons, united in being, purpose, function and will, equal and eternal, but distinct in their generation, or movement, and distinct in their appropriations, or, at what times they lead in the dance. For instance, the Father creates through the Son with the Spirit ordering. Likewise, the Son redeems, but is sent by the Father, anointed by the Spirit. The Spirit regenerates and created new life, but does so from out of the Son and the Father.

The three share in everything, since God is still one, always operating in self-giving love for each other, and for that which is created by their shared love. For me, it's a beautiful image to consider, called *perichoresis*, a 'circular dance.' It's my favorite image for the Trinity.

In about six weeks, we will have to do something to celebrate Josephine's fourth birthday, and while this will again mean gifts and time with friends and family, my hope for Jo and for Harrison is beyond a fleeting moment of happiness. As their father, I want to reveal some portion of this divine dance, by how I love them and their mother, in and through God's love.

I know that I am far from perfect, but I have an example to which I look and pray, we all do. Our example is the love of the Father for the Son and Son for the Father in the Holy Spirit, and how that love poured out into creation, by which we share in God's image. This love redeems creation, as the Son shared in our humanity to die for us, and it brings new creation by the Spirit that raised Jesus, and which raises us to new life now and eternally.

This is good news. This good news is a free gift which can change us, and smooth out those imperfections. And so, I pray that it will and that it does, so that my kids, your kids, everyone we know, will know God's love, and embrace God's ministry of reconciliation.

Likewise, my prayer for us as a church is that both I and the current leaders of this church, will faithfully love all of you, the congregation of this church and also our neighbors in and around Shelby and beyond. I pray we do so in and through the love we have for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God who is the reason why we are here. I pray that like the readers of Isaiah in exile, we all know we belong to God, and like the people in the water who were baptized with Jesus, we share in the inheritance that belongs to the Son.

It is an inheritance of the love of the Father, the fellowship of the Spirit, and the abundant and eternal life we have in Christ. And I believe and I pray, that the more we know and trust that we are God's beloved. I believe that the more we will participate in the amazing, exuberant, immense, overflowing, and unconditional love of God toward others, beginning with those closest to us, extending to all, then we will make this world a better place as God intends. Amen.