

Help us to hear your voice and learn to trust in it. In the name of the One in Whom we live and move and have our being, Amen!

Our Gospel reading this morning is from Matthew and everything hinges on the final verse. As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and a voice from heaven says, *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

That voice matters more than we sometimes realize. It speaks before Jesus teaches a single sermon. Before he heals anyone. Before he confronts power. Before he gives his life away. Jesus has not yet *done* anything—and yet he is named *Beloved*. Not because of what he has accomplished, but because of who he is.

Last year, on Advent IV, I left us with a question: *Are we willing to say yes to giving birth to the Son of God in our own lives?* That question still stands. But today, as we renew our baptismal vows, the invitation deepens. Today is not only about saying yes—it is about identity. I believe we are being called, commissioned if you will, to live our lives as beloved sons and daughters of God, just as Jesus did.

And that is not easy.

To live as the Beloved, that requires a shift in how we see reality itself. It asks us to develop a new set of eyes, a different way of perceiving the world—not through the lens of scarcity, fear, and competition, but through what many spiritual traditions call *non-dual consciousness*. A way of seeing that holds together what we often split apart: the sacred from the secular, the inner from the outer, the visible from the invisible.

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous puts this insight in its own plain language. Step 2 says we must come to trust in a power greater than ourselves—a power that can restore us to sanity. I would suggest that this is not just a recovery insight; it is a deeply Christian one. If we are going to find the willpower, motivation, and courage to live into our divine heritage as God’s beloved, we will need to tap into a power greater than ourselves.

Anne invited us last week to *glow*—to lighten up, to let joy and warmth return. But we cannot glow if we are exhausted from trying to prove our worth. We cannot lighten up if we are crushed under the weight of cynicism and despair. We need a new way of seeing—a new orientation to reality itself.

So what might help us align ourselves more intentionally with this perspective?

In recent weeks, voices I trust have been echoing this theme. One of them is Parker Palmer, founder of the Courage and Renewal movement. He recently wrote an essay titled “*Wintering Through Hard Times*,” reflecting on how to live faithfully at the intersection of the visible and invisible worlds.

Palmer describes finding solace in the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico after the execution of Renee Nicole by a masked ICE agent in Minnesota. He admits he was tempted to write about what he calls “arrogant, immoral, cruel, corrupt, and lawless misleaders,” but instead chose to stay with his deeper theme. He writes that the acronym ICE could not be more apt—that our current political climate keeps lowering the temperature on our humanity, hoping to freeze our hearts. Then he offers this haunting line: “**We need to learn how to keep our hearts alive while we winter through.**”

For Palmer, living in Madison, Wisconsin, “wintering through” begins with remembering that snow, ice, and death are not the whole story of what is happening outside his window. Deep in the earth, in a world he cannot see, life has hunkered down in preparation for rebirth. Because of that invisible world, spring always returns.

From that simple truth of nature, it becomes easier to embrace a larger reality: that all life—including our own—is sustained by a vast web of being from which we arose and to which we will return. However deadly conditions may become in the visible world, these invisible interconnections are always at work, quietly making all things brand new.

Palmer suggests that wintering through becomes possible when we stay in touch with that invisible web that supports us. But that does not happen automatically. We need practices—habits that open us to the life-giving power of what cannot be seen.

Every wisdom tradition understands this. Humanists read poetry to see beneath the surface of the taken-for-granted world. Buddhists practice mindfulness to uncover what is hidden in the present moment. Christians receive the sacraments as outward and visible signs of inward and invisible grace. Jews study Torah contemplatively to discover light within the words. Muslims repeat sacred phrases to draw nearer to God.

There is another practice Palmer names—one that has become especially important to me. On days when it is hard to believe that an invisible web of life supports and sustains us, (pause) I can act as *if* it is real. And when I treat others accordingly, that web becomes easier to see and feel. I don't know why it works that way, I only know it does.

If I regard every encounter with another human being as a chance to play my tiny part as a life-giver in the web of life, I become more open to receiving the new life it offers. If I treat the checkout person at the grocery store with dignity and respect, I feel warmed by a deep sense that I am loved and not alone.

Believing that we are sustained by an invisible force-field does not mean we sit back and enjoy the ride. The field depends, in part, on how we live. Wintering through holds one of the great paradoxes of being human: we must do everything we can in support of our common life, and we must trust that we are being upheld by a life-force power larger than our own.

Which reminds me of New Year's Day.

Like most mornings, I woke early, turned on the coffee, and checked the New York Times. I expected more warnings about a darker future shaped by the machinations of powerful people. But instead, the Times opened with these words: "*Good morning. Welcome to 2026.*" Then came the surprise. They announced that instead of bad news, they were going to talk about the psychology of hope.

Hope? From the gospel according to the Times? Yes indeed, here was an instance when the secular was about to become sacred.

They acknowledged that America has become a nation of cynics. Trust is eroding—between neighbors, in the media, and in government. Nearly 80 percent of Americans doubt their children's lives will be better than their own. About half believe our best days are behind us.

And then came the aha moment for me. Quoting Jamil Zaki of Stanford's Social Neuroscience Lab, the article suggested that while cynicism is on the rise, it is reversible—if we lean into hope. That line initially triggered my own cynicism that this was just going to be another Pollyanna, everything is beautiful, quixotic take on life (pause) until I read the distinction being made between optimism and hope: "*Optimism is the belief that the future will be better. Hope is the belief that we have the power to make it so.*" That distinction captivated me.

Zaki went on to say that hope requires three things: the ability to envision a better future, the motivation to move toward it, and a path from where we are to where we want to be.

Easier said than done.

Which brings us back to the Jordan River. As Jesus comes up out of the water, a voice names him *Beloved*. That voice gives him a future worth envisioning. It gives him the motivation to walk into the wilderness. And it gives him a path—not of domination, but of love.

To become the Beloved is not to earn God's pleasure, but to consent to it. To let the voice that says "*You are enough*" grow louder than the voices that demand proof, productivity, and performance. Belovedness is not sentimental—it is grounding. When we live from it, we are freer to love without fear, to risk compassion without needing credit, to stand in the world without our protective armor.

We do not become the Beloved by striving.

We become the Beloved by listening—
and then living as if the voice is telling the truth.

I close with a variation of Anne's blessing last week: May the force of love be with you in 2026. Amen!