

*Comfort Amid the Storm*– Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Rev. Matt Nieman

January 12, 2025

Anne Lamotte is a rather well-known spiritual writer and has been for many decades. A year and a half ago, she posted this entry on Facebook, which marked a significant anniversary for her:

“37 years ago today, on July 7, 1986, I got clean and sober. It is the great miracle of my existence, from which everything I love about life has sprung.

“I had published three books, had a great persona and reputation, and everyone knew and loved me — I still live in the county where I was born and raised. But my insides, my soul, felt like Swiss cheese, full of holes, toxic and nuts until I had the first cool refreshing beer of the day; just to get all the flies going in one direction.

“There is a sheet metal loneliness and isolation we alcoholics know which, besides the devastating self-esteem and were the worst parts. But I didn’t want to get sober. I loved drinking and getting drunk and did not mind being impaired as long as I was with a guy who didn’t mind that in a girl.

“What I wanted on July 7, 1986, was to figure out how to stop after six or seven social drinks and perhaps a little meth just to socialize. I was dirt poor and could not go off somewhere and clean up. And I had run out of any more good ideas, which is what Grace looks like sometimes.

“But God is such a show-off, and I fell in with some kind people who were sober, who wondered if I might be sick and tired of being sick and tired, and if so, if I needed a ride.

“I was broke for the first five years but I had a luscious little boy, and these people I’m telling you about. I was happier than I’d ever been. ... We tell newcomers not to quit before they get their miracle, because if they stay sober one day at a time, they will. That is a promise.

“Sobriety gave me everything alcohol and drugs promised — belonging, self-respect, more laughter than you can even imagine, and profound companionship. Life has gotten way too lifey sometimes in these 37 years, with a few almost unsurvivable losses, and many scary passages of time, but I never picked up a drink because of the people I am telling you about. ...”

Lamotte’s story is a story of recovery, of course, a story of fighting everyday to stay sober, a story of how addiction can overcome a life and threaten its very nature.

But it’s also a story of belonging. Without the men and women Lamotte clung to, that community of other sobriety-seeking men and women she leaned on in her toughest days, she may not have had any hope.

I bring up this story of belonging because today is the day when we mark the baptism of Jesus. And hence, it’s when we reaffirm our own baptisms and our ultimate belonging. (During the singing of the final hymn, I invite you to come to the font and touch the water as a reaffirmation of your own baptism.)

Baptism is about belonging. Baptism signifies our belonging to God. And there’s no chance of God divorcing God’s self from us. Our belonging to God is permanent.

And above all else — above even our most treasured and devoted relationships with each other — we find our ultimate comfort in the reality that we belong, as the Heidelberg

Catechism states, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.

There is much confusion in the world today. There is the confusion over what our ideology should be on a whole host of issues, there is a confusion over what to make of the great suffering in the world, there is confusion over the future and to what degree of prosperity there will be for us and for all humankind. Amid all this confusion, though, there remains the ultimate comfort that, no matter what happens, we belong always and forever to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Here in the third chapter of the gospel of Luke, a new character has come onto the scene. John the baptizer has come out of the desert. And he goes out all around the countryside preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He warns them about how they should behave: sharing what they have with others, not collecting any more taxes than are required, not accusing people falsely or extorting them for money.

And so, the gathered masses at that point are anxious and confused. They start wondering if John is the promised Messiah. They don't understand how John could be preaching such things if he himself wasn't the promised one.

"No," he says, "I baptize you with water but the one more powerful than I will come and will baptize with the Holy Spirit." And then, Jesus was baptized by John along with all the others. And afterward came those familiar words to Jesus from heaven, "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased."

We don't know the reaction of the crowd when this happened. It's not recorded in Luke. Maybe there was still confusion as to what this voice was and what it meant. But today, if you and I were as confused as these people were about

something so unsettling, we trust that what the voice of the Spirit said of Jesus it would also say of us, “You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased.”

The Spirit is alive today, speaking that message to every human. But, many times when distractions get in the way, we don’t hear well. We don’t hear that voice of comfort and inspiration reigning down like it did for Jesus on this day. And that’s because we live amid some mighty storms.

Those of you who enjoy vacationing on cruise ships would find this interesting.

A new Royal Caribbean cruise ship debuted last May, the *Icon of the Seas*. It’s the largest cruise ship in the world, with twenty-six decks, six water slides and seven swimming pools. It can accommodate 7,600 guests. It includes the largest swim-up bar on any cruise ship in the world, the *Swim and Tonic*. On board, you can see an ice show, acrobatics in the *AquaDome* and a comedy review in the *Manhattan Comedy Club*.

Evidently, the *Icon of the Seas* also has something called a *SeaPass Card*. This card, held by each guest, gives access to a cashless system used for all onboard purchases and services. A person with a *SeaPass* card can be connected to everything that *Icon of the Seas* has to offer. (Sounds tempting... and dangerous.)

There may not seem to be much connection between the *Icon of the Seas* and a life of finding our belonging in God. But try this connection: God gives us a sea pass that is more durable and meaningful.

To “everyone who is called by my name,” says God in Isaiah 43, “whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (v. 7) — to all of God’s people is given something more

precious. It carries the promise, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (v. 2). With this declaration, the LORD will always be with us, and the waters will not overwhelm.

Indeed, these waters we travel through can be rough. And the waters become rough due to a number of factors, such as our own sin. Our sin shields us from the reality that, no matter what errors we commit that go against the ways of God, God’s mercy and love remain intact. It’s incomprehensible how the things we do which are so awful could not compromise that. And yet, through God’s amazing grace, God still says to us, “You are mine. With you I am well pleased.”

The rough waters we face are also found in the hardship that is not of our own doing. Those, for example, who have been abused and neglected, they cannot fathom a kind of love for them or have not heard of that kind of love to begin with. Those who suffer the loss of someone dear to them and grieve their death find the waters treacherous to some degree for a long time afterward.

There are so many other people who live in less dangerous situations—even normal situations, really—who also struggle to know that kind of love. Unconditional, unmerited, relentless love. All because we belong to God.

In baptism, Jesus says to us, “You Are Mine.” It is Jesus speaking to kids, adults, widows, orphans. It is also Jesus speaking to middle-class, upper class, and lower-class people of all races and genders in our community and around the corner.

It is Jesus confirming once again that we belong to him. Hear his words again as we remain seated and sing the hymn, “You Are Mine.”