

Baptism of Our Lord
1st Sunday After Epiphany
January 10, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[click here to see scripture passages for this service](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

God says,

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. Do not fear, for I am with you.”

God’s people really needed to hear this message when they were in exile in Babylon. When it looked to all the world like they were abandoned and forsaken, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to say that they were beloved of God, that God was with them, that they did not have to be afraid. This was a particular promise given to God’s chosen people, Israel, that seems really exclusive - God even expresses a willingness to give up other people and nations as a ransom for Israel. And yet the book of Isaiah is also clear that Israel was chosen to be a light for the nations so that all people could know that we are created and loved by God and that God is present and active in our lives.

This same kind of promise was given to Jesus when he was baptized before he began his public ministry. After he and all the rest of the people with him were baptized, Jesus prayed. And then the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon Jesus and God spoke and called him Beloved Son. Jesus got to experience the same things that were spoken to the people of Israel - that he was beloved of God, that God was with him and that he did not need to be afraid as he headed into the trials of his ministry and death.

This was a particular experience and a particular promise given to Jesus but it’s not exclusive to him. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, we see that Jesus came for all people, for all the world, so that we would know that we are beloved of God, that God is with us, that we do not have to be afraid. The Gospel of Luke especially emphasizes that the poor and downtrodden are valued by God. It shows that God is constantly working to tear down and burn away the sin that leads us to treat others as anything less than beloved of God.

The message that we are beloved is also given to us in baptism. We are named “child of God”, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever - signs for us to know that God is with us always. This message, too, is not exclusive. All people are beloved of God whether they are baptized or not. But, baptism is a sign for us to return to again and again

to remind us of our true identity when the world gives us other messages. With this assurance, we can live in ways that show all people that they are God's beloved.

What a difference it makes to know that we are loved and not alone, that we do not have to be afraid. I saw a powerful example of this at, of all places, Dollywood - Dolly Parton's amusement park in Tennessee. While on vacation with my husband's family we spent 2 days there mostly standing in lines for the roller coasters. My kids, my husband, my brother-in-law and his wife and their twelve-year old daughter are all really into roller coasters but their ten-year old daughter, Sophia, was petrified of them. Sophia really wanted to be with the whole family, but she was so afraid of the roller coasters and so embarrassed about being afraid that she'd lash out at her parents and sister or turn quiet and sullen.

I could really relate to Sophia's fears and really wanted to just stay off the roller coasters with her, but Sophia only wanted to be with her mom, Laura, and I soon realized why. As I watched them, I could tell that Laura had clearly made a conscious decision to just be with Sophia that day. When Sophia wanted to try being in line for the rides, Laura would go with her. But then, as we stood there waiting, Sophia would hear all the safety announcements saying things like "this is a ride that goes at speeds up to 70 miles an hour with a 210 foot drop, guests with any health concerns should not even think about this ride". Sophia would panic and start to cry.

Laura, who loves roller coasters, would say alright, let's go on the bumper cars. But then Sophia would want to come back and try again so Laura would get in the end of the line away from the rest of us to wait with her. Laura knew Sophia would have a much better day if she could just go on the roller coasters with the rest of us but she also knew Sophia didn't need pressure. Sophia needed to know she was loved and valued whether or not she went on the silly roller coasters. Finally, Laura got Sophia in line with us and we all got her playing a game so she didn't listen to the scary announcements and she made it on a roller coaster and absolutely loved it. The rest of the day and the next day we couldn't get her off them. The presence of her mother and the message that she was beloved helped her to stop listening to the fears within and the scary messages without, to move outside of herself, to be part of the community, to take a risk.

I really don't like amusement parks and I really never thought I'd have a powerful experience of God's love at an amusement park, but there it was. We are so often like Sophia. We listen to the voices within and the scary messages outside telling us that we don't have enough time, money or energy; telling us that we aren't enough; that we should fear those who are different from us. Our fears cut us off from others. We lash out, we turn inward, sullen and embarrassed. We become paralyzed and unable to do things that are much more important than going on roller coasters - we become unable to take risks, make changes, or help others.

But even in all of this, we are not alone. God is with us, we are God's beloved always - whether we are being as fearful as Sophia, as patient as Laura or as self absorbed as the rest of us who wouldn't get out of the roller coaster lines. God is with us, loving us into courage, into trust, into openness. This is a message we need to hear again and again: we are not alone, we do not

need to be afraid. This is the message we hear when we remember the promises of our baptisms. This is the message we hear when we pray. It was when Jesus was praying after his baptism that he heard God telling him he was beloved.

And this is the message God asks us to bring to one another, just as Laura did for Sophia. This is the message that parents of Syrian children need to hear as they shepherd their children into extreme risk and danger in order to save their lives - you are not alone, we are with you, God is with you. This is the message undocumented people in the US need to hear as they take a path to citizenship - you are not alone, we are with you, God is with you. This is the message our country needs to hear as we face threats from all kinds of radicals - God is present, we are not alone, we do not need to respond with fear and hatred.

And, this is the message we need to hear as we think about helping to resettle Syrian refugees and wonder what that would mean for us - we are not alone, God is with us. No matter what the voices within or the messages without tell us, God tells us do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.

Thanks be to God.