

Sermon For Sunday, January 8, 2017 - "Begin with Beloved"

First Sunday After Epiphany
Baptism of Our Lord
January 8, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Begin with Beloved

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

How do you begin something new - a new year, a new day, a new project? Do you make lists? Do you do a lot of research? Or do you just dive right in? As you start, do you wonder if you will measure up? Do you feel like it all depends upon you and what you can accomplish?

How will we begin this new year as a congregation with lots of plans and projects ahead of us? How will we live as citizens in a divided nation at the beginning of a new president's term? How do we begin? And what will help us to begin with a sense of hope and purpose rather than anxiety and despair? The story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry gives us some insight. It begins with baptism.

Jesus' ministry starts only after he enters the waters, the Spirit descends upon him, and God calls him Beloved. All four Gospels tell us that Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism and all four tell us about it. Only two of the Gospels have accounts of Jesus birth; but very early on in each of the four Gospels, we hear about Jesus' baptism. After the birth accounts in Luke and Matthew, we don't hear much about Jesus until his baptism. Jesus lives a quiet life in obscurity until the day he is baptized and named God's beloved Son. Baptism is where it all really starts for Jesus. His story begins the day he hears he is beloved.

And Jesus doesn't have to do anything, or prove anything, or measure up before God calls him beloved. When God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased", Jesus hasn't yet done anything of note. He hasn't accomplished anything that anyone found impressive enough to record. Before anything significant happens, God claims Jesus and gives him the identity - Beloved Son. The rest of Jesus' ministry flows out of this identity. He loves, heals, preaches, teaches and redeems. Not so that he might measure up and gain God's approval, but because he is secure in his identity that he is beloved.

We, too, are God's beloved. This is the identity that God gives to us; it is not something we have to earn. The message that we are beloved is 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 to help us know who we are. All people are loved by 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.

For most of us, baptism is the beginning of our life of faith. Our faith stories begin the day we're told we're children of God. But what if we began everything with the assurance that we are beloved? What would it be like if we began each day, each project, each year with a reminder of our true identity and let that identity guide us? What if we began with beloved? So often we begin our days, our years, our tasks with a sense of anxiety - the worry that we don't have enough, can't do enough, aren't enough. Many of our New Year's Resolutions arise out of the sense that we aren't enough and have to do or be more, be better.

Beginning with beloved reminds us that God calls us beloved before we have done anything to prove ourselves, before we have accomplished anything. This allows us to live with freedom and boldness rather than a focus on our own efforts and achievements. It allows us to focus on serving others and joining God's work rather than proving ourselves. Sometimes, we begin things with a sense of isolation, feeling alone in the challenges we face. We carry the weight of the world on our shoulders and feel that it's up to us alone to fix our families, help our church, heal our nation.

Beginning with beloved reminds us that we belong to God. We are part of something much bigger than ourselves and we are held in God's love. Still other times, even as we begin, we feel despair, wondering if things will ever change despite our best efforts. Beginning with beloved grounds us in hope beyond our efforts, beyond results. It gives us purpose in the midst of discouraging realities. There is much we cannot change but we can focus on treating all people as God's beloved. What a difference that would make in the world if we all lived with that focus.

As we begin a new year, let's begin each day, each project, with the reminder that we are God's beloved. Right after Jesus was baptized he was led out into the wilderness to face struggle, trial, temptation. He met it all with faith and courage, with the assurance that God was with him, and that he was beloved of God. Jesus began with beloved and he had what he needed. Beginning with that identity will give us what we need as well as we enter into our challenges, our own wildernesses, into all that the year will bring.

Author Jan Richardson offers a blessing for us:

Beloved Is Where We Begin

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.
Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.
Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find

it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.
I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.
I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.
I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us

bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:
Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.