

Sermon for Sunday, January 7, 2018 - "Our True Name"

Baptism of Our Lord
January 7, 2018
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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

As Jesus was baptized, God called him Beloved. Before Jesus did anything publicly, before any of his ministry, God claimed Jesus as Beloved Son.

This name was spoken with such force that it permeated Jesus' entire life and work. He went on to name others as God's Beloved and offer them healing, welcome and blessing. He gave of himself freely and fully trusting that he belonged to God. That name Beloved, spoken over Jesus, had enormous power.

We, too, are all Beloved of God. And God names us so in the waters of baptism. Before we do anything, God announces that we are claimed, chosen, beloved children of God.

Being named as God's Beloved has the power to permeate our entire life and all our work. But, sometimes we forget who we are.

We need people like Fayette to remind us of our true name and what it means for us. Fayette's story was shared by her pastor, Rev. Janet Wolf.

"Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She found her way to the [church I serve]... and joined the new member class. The conversation about baptism especially grabbed Fayette's imagination. During the class, Fayette would ask again and again, 'And when I'm baptized, I'm named ...?' The class learned to respond, 'Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.' 'Oh, yes!' she'd say, and then the discussion could resume."

The day of Fayette's baptism came. "She went under, came up spluttering, and cried, 'And now I'm named ...?' And we all sang, 'Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.' 'Oh, yes!' she shouted as she danced around."

"Two months later", Rev. Wolf reports, "I received a phone call. Fayette had been attacked and beaten and was at the county hospital. So I went. I could see her from a distance, pacing back and forth. When I got to the door, I heard, 'I am beloved' She turned, saw me, and said, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and' catching sight of herself in the mirror - hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew - she started again, 'I am beloved, precious child of God, and ...' She looked in the mirror again and declared, '... and God is still working on me. If you come back tomorrow, I'll be so beautiful I'll take your breath away!'" Fayette knew the truth of her identity deep in her bones. She knew that no matter what happened to her, she was God's beloved.

We whose lives are more secure than Fayette's can often forget that we, and all people, are God's beloved.

We define ourselves and others by how much or little we accomplish and by all the other titles and roles we carry. We judge ourselves harshly, calling ourselves all sorts of names other than beloved. We judge others harshly refusing to see that they too are children of God. We forget that we are all precious in God's sight, not because of anything we've done or haven't done, but because God creates, claims, and blesses us.

This is why we need worship: to be reminded again and again that we are forgiven and set free to live as God's beloved, to give us eyes to see others for who they truly are. This is why we need baptism and reminders of our baptism to help us know what God already knows - we are God's beloved.

This name has the power to define our whole lives. This name gives us a deep awareness of who and whose we are. This name calls us to live in such a way that others will know themselves as beloved by God - especially those who've been told that they are somehow less than children of the God who created them. This name allows us to give ourselves freely and fully for the sake of the world, trusting that we are held in God.

Of course, as Jesus and as Fayette knew all too well, being named as God's Beloved does not mean life will be easy.

When God claimed Jesus as Beloved Son, it wasn't a comforting, warm fuzzy experience - the name was spoken as the heavens were torn apart. The whole creation, the whole religious order was shaken by what God was doing in Jesus. The name was spoken right before Jesus was driven into the desert to face temptation and into his public ministry that would lead to his death. Being called God's Son put Jesus on a collision course with all the forces that defy God.

And yet in baptism, God had said yes to Jesus and so Jesus was able to say yes to his God-given identity and purpose again and again. In the face of trials and temptations, as the crowds pressed in, when death stalked, Jesus said yes to God with his whole life. And God was faithful - God said yes to Jesus again and raised him to new life.

Fayette also heard God's yes in her baptism and she too was able to say, "oh yes" to her God-given identity again and again. In the face of great suffering, when all evidence pointed to the contrary, she could say, "Oh yes, I am God's beloved, and God isn't finished with me yet."

This truth will carry us when we face all that life can throw at us. When we are tempted, attacked, beaten down and weary, we can trust in the power of God's proclamation - you are my beloved. When we are on top of the world and showered with acclamations, we can trust this deeper, more lasting truth about ourselves that God declares. God has said yes to you; you are "Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold." Oh, yes. Amen.

We'll take a moment of reflection and then rise to join in our hymn, a change from the bulletin. We'll sing Hymn #454 Remember and Rejoice.