

“Beloved”
Isaiah 42:1-4, 43:1-4; Mark 1:4-11
Sunday, Jan 7, 2018
David Hutchinson

In the novel - - “Beloved” - - two people - - meet a woman along a roadside.

The two go by the names of Sethe and Paul D.

They ask HER name - - and the scene goes like this...

“You from around here ?”, Sethe asked her.

After giving her water to drink - cup after cup of water - they begin to talk.

The woman is thirsty - and thin.

She shook her head no - and reached down to take off her shoes.

Sethe bent down to pick them up.

“What might your NAME be?” asked Paul D. /

“Beloved”, she said.

Her voice so low - and rough - they looked at each other.

They heard the VOICE first - - and later they heard the NAME.

“Beloved. / You use a last name, Beloved?” he asked.

“Last?” - - - she seemed puzzled.

And then, “No”, and she spelled it for him - slowly.

He recognized - - the careful enunciation of letters by those - like himself - who could not read - but had memorized the letters of their name. / He was about to ask - who her PEOPLE were - but thought better of it. / A young black woman drifting - was drifting from ruin.

And so - the main character of the novel *Beloved* reveals her name.

It turns out - - it's a name taken from a headstone - on which the engraver had not had time - to write out the whole name - - the preacher had said, "Dearly beloved" - - so...

As to her people - the answer comes from the author.

The ascription at the beginning of this book by Toni Morrison is a Bible verse:

Romans 9:25

"I will call them my people, which were not my people;
and her beloved, which was not my beloved."

This beloved drifter - given a name - which - - - for many like her -

- went unfulfilled. / They were NOT - - beloved. /

"Beloved" - - That's what God calls Jesus - in this morning's Gospel reading.

Just - - as Jesus was baptized - - God called Jesus beloved.

As Jesus rose up out of the water - just at that moment - according to Mark - - and Luke and Matthew too - - they all report what was heard just then: "My beloved son."

And - - when WE baptize - - now in the present day - the pastor will often ask for - - or say the child's NAME. / And that happens at a similar moment.

At the moment of the water: "What is the Christian name of this child?"

And the child - becomes a sign to the world - that God loves us.

That we are RAISED up by God.

That we are - beloved - - of God.

And it is something - that we ought to remember.

But that we often forget.

Sometimes - that we even - reject it:

God's love for us.

As we are BORN anew in baptism - - we are born by the Spirit - named -
 - - CREATED anew - if you will - -
 - - and as that happens - God is pleased.

It's a similar thing with the Old Testament prophet - in the book of Isaiah.

As the servant is described - we read:

“Behold - - my servant - -
 - - my CHOSEN - - - in whom my soul - - DELIGHTS”.
 Which is a little like saying “my beloved”.

Isaiah goes on -

“Thus says God -
 - God who created the heavens -
 - who spread forth the earth -
 - who gives breath - to the people -
 - and spirit - to those who walk the earth -
 - - God is the God of covenant and of promise.

Then later - - in chapter 43 Isaiah describes God as saying,

“I have redeemed you - I have CALLED you by name - and you are mine”

And YOU - - - are a NEW thing.

Created - and called - by God.

Chosen. / Beloved.

Both the case of Jesus -

- and of the servant - described in Isaiah -
 - they were expected - to bring salvation - and justice to the world.

The beloved ones - - bring – light - - according to the Bible.

They call people to repentance.

And so - somehow - in their beloved-ness - -

WE - and the whole world - are ALSO beloved by God.

God has longed for us - since the beginning.

Loved us since the creation of the world.

In Genesis - God looked out over creation - and said, “It is good”

And since then - and in the mean time -

- we have had QUARRELS with God.

We wonder why JUSTICE is NOT complete NOW.

We picture the world as we wish it was.

We misunderstand God’s purposes - like John misunderstood - - when Jesus came to be baptized. / John would have prevented Jesus - - but Jesus said - let it be so.

And so John consented.

But we don’t often - so easily consent - to God.

And LIVING INTO our baptism - - can be - - a life long journey for us - - filled with ups and downs. / Living into our baptism means that eventually our insides come to match the name we have been given. / The package and the contents are congruent.

What I mean might be illustrated by a simple little experience I had once. I had purchased a bag of snacks at Plaid Pantry:

The NAME of the snack was “Western Trail Mix”. But as I was eating it, I noticed the description on the back of the package. It said, “To capture the taste of the Far East”! / So which was it? West or East?

The label on the outside of the package - - went on to describe the contents - - on the inside of the package. The contents were intended to capture the “taste of the Far East” it said - - on the back of the package - - in very small print.

But the NAME on the FRONT of the snack was “Western Trail Mix”!

In BIG letters.

What was THIS – I wondered!

I’d been hoodwinked!

I had been sold something - - under false pretences.

The name on the FRONT - - and the contents - - didn’t seem to match...

Which got me thinking about “Beloved” again.

The name God gives us all - - is beloved.

According to God - - that’s what should be printed on our foreheads.

But - - what does that mean for our insides and our hearts and souls?

Are we intended to live up to it?

Or just - - to receive it as a gift?

Or...is it somehow...both?

Do we resist our baptismal identity like John did?

Do we resist believing - - that our insides - - and all of us - - is beloved of God?

And did EVEN Jesus - - - resist it?

Did Jesus remember God’s voice calling, “beloved”

- for the rest of his life?

When he was ridiculed?

When he turned over tables - in the temple?

Did Jesus FORGET his identity as beloved - - in the garden of Gethsemane?

When he said: God why have you forsaken me?

Or - - on the cross?

And yet beloved is - - who Jesus is.

God's - beloved.

It is who we are.

Our identity as a community of faith begins there.

And so - - in the end - maybe we can - no more - resist it than Jesus could.

If you are not baptized - - or not a Christian - - or you know someone who is not -
- - I hope you will take some word of hope from what I'm saying today.

This is about HOPE - - not exclusion.

I'm talking from my perspective within this Christian community. I am pondering what it means that personal identity is connected to community. And community is based in part on commitment to one another and to certain basics.

For us Christians, this is who we are...

We are - baptized.

We are - - followers of Jesus.

We are - beloved.

And we hope to share that gift with the world:

To share what we understand as God's hope

that all would respond to that love.

Why was Jesus baptized - - after all?

Why would a SINLESS man - be baptized for repentance?

Because there is MORE to it than - - repentance!

Repentance - was the baptism of John.

But Jesus - - baptism - by the Holy Spirit -

- - accompanied by the DOVE - like the dove in the story of Noah -

- - is a story of DELIVERANCE - -

- - from the deluge of the FLOODwaters - - of sin and evil - -

- - Jesus baptism - is a SIGN to the world - - of that hope.

Just like OUR baptism is.

So - - yes - our baptism has a personal dimension.

We are named.

We enter into the Church - of Jesus Christ - through it.

We claim - God's grace and forgiveness - - and repent of sin.

AND - - it is ALSO - - MORE than personal.

Our baptism - like Jesus' baptism - is a sign to the world.

A sign that we are ALL loved.

We are God's - - beloved.

Whether we feel like it - or resist it - or not.

Let us remember that - - and RENEW that - today.

And then begin again - - to live into that.

Amen.