

“Beloved is Where We Begin”

Psalm 25:1-10, Mark 1:9-15

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday, the evening before Easter. Sundays in Lent are not counted in the forty days because each Sunday represents a "mini-Easter". In the early church, Lent was a time to prepare new converts for baptism. The number of forty days represents the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring the temptation of Satan and preparing to begin his ministry. We will follow Jesus' footsteps remembering, retelling and participating in the story of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as we continue the journey during Lent. I hope we will take this 40-day journey as a great opportunity to get closer to God.

“Just a Closer Walk with Thee” is this year’s Lenten theme. Kathy Glass and soup kitchen volunteers prepare for a meal of soup, bread and Peanut butter sandwiches for every Thursday and Saturday. If you want to make a more meaningful Lenten season, please come and join us. We will follow Jesus’ footsteps together. There will be plenty of food for your strength and energy so that you will not be hungry and weary. Dedra helped me put an image of Jesus’ walking feet on the road along for the bulletin cover graphic as a symbol of our journey. Imagine you were in Jesus’ shoes. After Jesus received baptism from his colleague, John the Baptist, he was taken by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness and had to face a time of temptation by Satan in the wilderness to get ready for His Messianic mission as the Son of God. We know that his public ministry, especially his final journey to Jerusalem wasn’t a fun and exciting trip. Rather it was a fearful and dreadful trip towards death on the cross. Now we are about to follow Jesus’ serious journey. Truly we need courage, faith and hope to go along with him. The season of Lent provides us a spiritual opportunity and practice to take pause and reflect on our life path and journey following Jesus’ boldness, mission-oriented life. And his courageous steps forward to love others and love God no matter what might happen to him. What lesson do we find in our Scripture reading today? There is one word that I ask for your special attention. That is “Beloved”.

The Gospel of Mark is our centering passage. Let's go deeper. Look at verse 11. It says, "And a voice came from heaven, "'You are my Son, the Beloved.'"" This is the main concern and highlight for the Gospel of Mark. The author of Mark seriously emphasizes that Jesus is not merely a great prophet and teacher Rabbi, but he assured us and his readers that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. He proclaimed boldly in the event of Jesus' baptism. In other words, baptism reminded Jesus of clarity of his self-identity as Messiah for his public life, mission and crucifixion on the cross. Surprisingly, his ministry began with this simple reminder of a voice from God that he is God's beloved son! This is the whole theme for the Gospel of Mark.

In the same way, our baptism and Christian faith identify who we are in our relationship with God. Our God never forgets us nor ever abandons us even though we sometimes turn away from God because our heart changes. God never changes His love for us. God loves us as much as he loves His Son Jesus. And Jesus sacrificed his life to prove how special and precious we are. A United Methodist Church pastor Travis Franklin reminds us that God wants for us- to experience life at its best and meaningful.¹

Friends, you are a beloved child of God. We are all beloved God's children! Henri J.M. Nouwen, Catholic priest and Christian spiritual master in his book, "Life of the Beloved" reminds us that we are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives. God wants us to claim this for ourselves, "You are my Beloved." Henry Nouwen invites us to listen to God's voice in our hearts with great inner attentiveness. He hears at his center words that say,

I have called you by name, from the beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb...I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child...Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know my as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother and sister, your lover and your spouse...yes, even your child. Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one.²

¹ <http://www.ministrymatters.com/preach/entry/2359/sermon-options-february-18-2018> Accessed Feb.16, 2018

² Norman Shawchuck and Rueben P. Job: *A Guide Prayer for All Who Seek God* (Nashville: Upper

This is the heart of God for his people. In the Hebrew wisdom in Isaiah 49:15, God expressed and proclaimed His steadfast love for his people when the Israelites believed that God had forsaken and forgotten them. But God said, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Though she may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” (NRSV) As we read Psalm 25 in verse 10, “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.” God’s love for you and me is steadfast and faithful. This is our God that we want to remember in our hearts. How important we are to God!

One of our church members shared her favorite poem with me. You will find this in the back of today’s bulletin. It inspires me as we are about to begin our Lenten journey reminding us who we are to God’s eyes. I share this with you.

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.*³

³ Jan Richardson, "Beloved Is Where We begin" from *Circle of Grace* Accessed Feb.16 2018

God loves you because God made you very special in His image. God wants you to know how special and unique you are in God's eye. And that is the blessing that God has given in you and your soul. Remember that in the world there is nobody like you. You are the only one in all of creation who has your own ability, ideas and feelings. God made you unique for a very special purpose. As Jesus discovered who he is in the baptism through a voice from God, God wants you to know that you are also precious children of God like Jesus. Don't go off on your journey alone. Instead, go with the blessing of God and assuring you that God is with you in your life journey!

Truly, Lent is a time of soul-searching and finding who we are in our life wilderness. I pray that you will discover this loving God during this special season of Lent, Amen.