

“Beloved of God”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17; 21-22 – Tesa Hauser
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be reminded that we are your beloved children. In Jesus' name, Amen.

How often do you think about your name? For some, there may be a family history surrounding their name, and for others, they have a meaning that was important for those that bestowed the name. Are there nicknames you have received? You see, I always wanted a nickname growing up. However, my name is not long enough to create a nickname or shortened version out of it. It seemed weird to people to call me something other than my 4-letter name. But there is this intimacy and familiarity that we sometimes associate with nicknames, right? Only some people may address you by that name, and some people may not know you even have a nickname. In these two passages, there is a lot of name-calling going on, but don't worry, it's the good kind.

We remember Jesus' baptism today and our baptism. The baptism of Jesus is in every Gospel, which means it is important. In the Gospel of Luke, this event occurs before Jesus officially begins his ministry. After the baptism, Jesus is praying, and that is when the heavens open. During this event, the Holy Spirit commissions and empowers Jesus for the work ahead. God then reminds Jesus that he is loved and provides Jesus with a new title or name, the Beloved. We see that

John the Baptist mentions Jesus will be more powerful than he is, and Jesus' ministry doesn't begin with showing everyone how powerful and mighty he is but reminded by God he is loved.

His new life and ministry begin with this reassurance by God. The mighty messiah is the Beloved. It shows how important love is to the ministry of Jesus, which will show God's love and how to love one's neighbor as oneself. In our baptism, we are responding to God's redemptive action in Jesus, and we are now a part of the body of Christ. We are now a beloved community led by the Beloved. There is a special calling for us to recognize the love of God in Christ and share that with other Christ-followers and the world.

The word "beloved" used in Luke is the Greek word: *agapétos*, which means divinely loved. As Isaiah notes, in verse 4, God's people are precious in God's sight. However, before we continue, I want us to think more deeply about how these words would feel for the audience of this message in Isaiah. The audience is a people in exile, displaced without homes dealing with heartbreak, grief, and hardship. They are wondering where God is in the midst of this season, and then these words by the prophet are given to them. As one commentary I read noted, the prophet is telling the people, "You have been created by God, redeemed by God, named by God, and claimed by God." For people who may not know where they belong, God says you belong to and with me. You are loved by me. You matter to

me. God then goes into depth about the lengths God will go to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the people.

Though not our experience, we are also the people of God. In our hardships and situations, we can lean on the words of the prophet and know we are precious in God's sight, we are honored, and God loves us. It is a divine love that will never leave us nor forsake us; it is a rod and staff that will comfort us as we go through the dark valley. Being precious to God means our lives have a high value to God. Our uniqueness, our gifts, our quirks, our whole selves are valuable to God, even when they don't seem valuable to us. For me, that is an overwhelming and sometimes unbelievable concept, and I would like to think I am not alone in this.

The root word for honored in Isaiah means to be heavy, weighty, or burdensome. To love is to be burdened sometimes, and to feel loved, you may feel like a burden to others. Love sometimes feels like a burden because we are human and have limitations. The real kicker is that we are different human beings and require different things, love, and are loved differently. We don't want to burden others with our lives, with our hardships, and our heaviness. However, we rejoice with those who rejoice, we mourn with those who mourn, and we carry the weight of existence with one another, as a beloved community. God has decided to be "burdened" in covenant relationship with us, who are not always loving and can

take advantage of love at times. I don't think we are a burden to God because God has said you are precious and are loved.

In Luke, John the Baptist says he is incredibly unworthy; he is lower than the servants and can't even take Jesus' sandals off. In the other Gospels, it is John who baptizes Jesus. Even John the Baptist, this great preparer for the Messiah, did not see that he was precious and beloved by God, and that was all that made him worthy to baptize Jesus. People thought he was the Messiah. It is an example of humbleness, but don't let that get in the way of what God is doing in your life and the ministry God has for you. Jesus looks at John and lets him know that it is right for him to be doing this. I bet John felt seen, and known, and loved when Jesus confirms it is indeed him who should be baptizing him.

Through Jesus, we are the beloved community, meant to identify as the beloved of God and live out of this truth. It can be hard when society tells us to put our identity in things that do not help us realize our true beloved identity. We may put our identity in our work, our ability to parent, or how much we are liked by others. The order of things and the place from which we live, and love, get all wonky when we put our identity elsewhere. What happens when we don't stand in that truth is we mess up at work, and our identity is "I am a mess," not I messed up; when we yell at our child or loved one, our identity becomes "I am a terrible parent/spouse," not, I did an unkind and unloving thing. Our identity grounded as

the beloved should help us live a life empowered to show love to ourselves, even when we don't get it right.

As we remember our baptism and Jesus' baptism, I hope that we no longer see ourselves and others the same anymore. As mentioned, the baptism and beloved scene occur before Jesus begins his ministry. The foundation is Jesus knowing he is loved by God, and will, in turn, allow him to love himself and love his neighbor as himself. How can you love your neighbor as yourself if you don't love yourself? God comes to Jesus and says, let me give you the foundation to live and do ministry. It will be hard, and loving others will also be hard. We have met the disciples. But how can you give what do you do not have?

We are God's precious, honored, and beloved. As the body of Christ we share in this belovedness. This truth will sustain us as we go through the wilderness. The next scene is Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days, where he is tempted three times. Each time his response is founded on knowing his identity as the Beloved of God. When it is hard to love that one person or be loving in that situation, remember you are the beloved of God. When you don't see yourself as deserving of love, remember you are the beloved of God. God has called us by name; we are no longer strangers but intimately known and cared for by the wonderful, loving, and caring God. May we live our lives in such a way. Alleluia and Amen.