

“You Are God’s Beloved”

Luke 3:21-22, Isaiah 43:1-7

Pastor James York

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Do you ever feel abandoned? Life sometimes wears us down leaving us exhausted, lonely and fearful. Life sometimes comes at us in waves of loss overwhelming us. Waves of lost things, lost dreams, lost hopes, lost loves, lost health, lost relationships. Life sometimes burns us with consuming fire. We try some things and we go down in flames. Sometimes we love boldly but get burnt. Our pain, suffering and sorrows leave us afraid. We become confused and unsure. Life becomes arduous.

The great theologian Dr. Seuss describes life in “Oh, the Place You’ll Go!” He begins by describing the great places we will go. “You’ll be on your way up! You’ll be seeing great sights! You’ll join the high fliers who soar to high heights... Except when you don’t, Because sometimes you won’t. I’m sorry to say so but, sadly it’s true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups [will] happen to you. You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You’ll be left in a lurch. You’ll come down from the Lurch with an unpleasant bump. And the chances are, then, that you’ll be in a Slump. And when you’re in a slump, you’re not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done. You will come to a place where the streets are not marked. Some windows are lighted. But mostly they’re darked. A place you can sprain both your elbow and chin! Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in? How much can you lose? How much can you win? And **if** you go in, should you turn left or right... or right-and-three-quarters? Or, maybe, not quite? Or go around back and sneak in from behead? Simple it’s not, I’m afraid you will find for a mind-maker-upper to make up their mind. You can get so confused that you’ll start in to race down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space, headed, I fear, toward a most useless place, The waiting Place... Somehow you’ll escape all that waiting and staying. You’ll find the bright places where Boom Bands are playing... Except when they don’t. Because, sometimes, they won’t. I’m afraid that some times you’ll play lonely games too. Games you can’t win ‘cause you’ll play against you. All alone! Whether you like it or not, Alone will be something you’ll be quite a lot. And when you’re alone there’s a very good chance you’ll meet things that scare you right out of your pants. There are some, done the road between hither and yon, that can scare you so much you won’t want to go on.” The weather will be foul. Your enemies will prowl. You’ll be on a frightening creek. Your arms will get sore and your sneakers will leak.

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to all who feel abandoned, overwhelmed, burnt, consumed and afraid. **Isaiah 43:1-7 NRS “But now thus says the LORD, God**

who created you, O Jacob, God who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

God calls all of us by our name. God calls you by name. God knows everything about you. God knows all the beauty, gifts, goodness and love you have and are capable of. God knows all your struggles. You are God's beloved. You have a place, an identity, a purpose, for you have a unique belonging in God's family. You have special aspects that no one else has that when shared give the rest of us a more complete perception of the glory of God. None of us are ever abandoned for God is always with each of us. God, who gets everyone through trials and tribulations until they are truly set free to abundant life in heaven, is calling our name. God, who is our savior, redeemer, liberator, restorer, is calling our name.

God is saying you are precious in my sight, honored and I love you. God constantly is speaking to you a straightforward and unconditional declaration of love and favor. Earthly life is at times really hard because there are many aspects of life that distort God's love for us causing us to feel worthless, dishonored and unlovable. Because people kept forgetting they were loved by God, God came to us in human flesh, in Jesus. The gospel of Luke tells of the baptism of Jesus. **Luke 3:21-22 NRS "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."**

Why was Jesus baptized? Jesus was free of sin so there was no need for the waters of grace to forgive and cleanse him. Through baptism Jesus is seen as one of us, all of us, so we can hear God speak to each of us personally, "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. Jesus was baptized so the heavens can be opened for each of us, so we can receive the Holy Spirit, be filled with awe, wonder, love and joy and hear God personally speaking into our lives to overcome hopelessness, pain, death, sin, brokenness and suffering with grace and belonging, to shine into our lives to overcome darkness with the glory of God's eternal light.

Pastor Julie Jensen points out. “Only an unthinkable fool would experience the cruelties of life and not wonder at times whether God is really there or really cares.” Martin Luther struggled with the difficulties of life. Luther began every day by making the sign of the cross on himself and saying, “I am baptized.” Luther didn’t say I was baptized rather “I am baptized”. Our baptism happened in the past yet continues to happen every moment of our life. I am baptized. I am loved by God. I belong to God. Despite my sin I am continuously being forgiven and redeemed. Despite the bombardment of difficulties I am continually being saved. Despite all my brokenness I am being healed. Despite death and all the forms of death I am being raised to eternal abundant life.

Earthly life is a middle ground between heaven and hell, a border between all the pain of a broken, fallen world and all the joy of a perfect life. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River the border, the middle ground between exile and the Promised Land. Interrupting the Silence Dot Com says. “Baptism always takes place at the border of life as it is and life as it might be. That border is the river Jordan. Geographically, symbolically, and theologically the Jordan River is the border on which baptism happens. It is the border between exile and the Promised Land; the border between life as survival and a life that is thriving; the border between sin and forgiveness; the border between the tomb and the womb; the border between death and life. We all stand on that border at multiple points in our lives. Some of you stand there now. Some of you experience that border as a place of loss, fear, pain. For others it is a place of joy, hope, and healing. In reality it is both at the same time. The only reason we can stand at the border of baptism is because Jesus stood there first. We stand on the very same border on which Jesus baptism took place. Jesus’ baptism is for our sake and salvation. Jesus baptism makes ours possible. The water of baptism does not sanctify Jesus. Instead Jesus sanctifies the water for our baptism. The water that once drowned is now also sanctified water that gives life. Through baptism we no longer live according to the biological laws of nature but by relationship with God. This is the God, our God, who says, **Isaiah 43:1 “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name you are mine.”** That means when we pass through the waters of sorrow and difficulty God is with us. The rivers that can drown will not overwhelm us. That means when we walk through the fire of loss and ruination we are not burned. The flames that can destroy will not consume us. For Jesus is the Lord our God, the Holy one of Israel, our Savior. To know this, to trust this, to experience this is the gift of baptism.”

“Does God protect us? Is the question Scott Bader-Saye asks and reflects upon by telling the story of his friend, Steve, who was dying of cancer. Steve received a well-intentional but hurtful letter from a woman who suggested that, if he just had more faith, God might yet heal him. Far from providing comfort the letter struck Steve like a hot iron of judgment. With the help of his twin brother, for he was by then too weak to take pen in hand himself—Steve drafted a reply that read, in part: I share your faith in the almighty

power of God to heal and sustain us. There may be times, though when God's greatest miracle is not the miracle of physical healing, but the miracle of giving us strength in the face of suffering...As I read the Bible, God's promise is to remove all our suffering in the next life, though not necessarily in this one. In this world, we will sometimes weep, suffer and die. But in the New Jerusalem **Revelation 2:14** **"God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away."** I sincerely hope that if my cancer continues to grow, no one will see it as a failure of my faith in God, but that perhaps people can see me as faithful even if I die while I am still young. I do not claim to understand God's will, but I do know that I am in God's hands, whether in life or in death."

Life is so hard, confusing and difficult because we live in the middle ground. Some of us will live our entire life in exile like Moses. Almost all of the generation of Israelites that lived the exodus died with Moses in exile, yet they knew they belonged to God. In the midst of all their hardship there were the freeing waters of the red sea, the fire by night, the cloud guided by the wind by day, the manna and God speaking to each of them, calling them by name. Some of us, by chance, will live our entire life in the Promise Land. Most of us oscillate back and forth between exile and the Promised Land. Some of us will spend the majority of life in exile with only a few fleeting moments in the Promised Land. Some of us will go back and forth almost moment by moment.

Water the symbol for baptism. Wind and fire the symbol for the Holy Spirit are all essential for life and can destroy life. All of them reflect the struggle of earth, this middle ground, where we live. Yet each of them water, wind and fire can provide wonderful blessings and joy.

Regardless of where you live, you are God's child. You are beloved. God is well pleased with you. God has redeemed you and is calling you by name. God is with you. God will always be with you. God is your savior. God will get you through to the glory God formed and made uniquely for you. Amen