1-9/10-21 Courage to Claim Our Identity Rev. Amy Haines

Mark 1:4-11

If you have been baptized, do you remember your baptism? If you do remember your baptism, did you see a dove or hear a voice? Whether or not you remember your baptism, whether or not your baptism was life changing or a seed planted on the journey of faith, your baptism is still an important moment for your life and for your faith. Through our baptisms, we are claimed by God as Beloved Sons or Daughters of God. Through our baptisms, we are reminded of who and whose you are. Baptism is more than a family tradition, more than a simple ritual; baptism is a sacrament of God’s grace that reveals God to us and with us and for us.

In the Gospel of Mark, the baptism of Jesus is the foundational moment that declares who Jesus is, affirming his identity as the Son of God. There are no angelic messengers, no birth narrative, no foreign magi.

The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptizer in the desert wilderness calling people to be baptized to show that they wanted to change their ways and be forgiven of their sins. Yet John also declared that soon One would arrive who would bring with him the Holy Spirit of God.

That One was no other than Jesus. When Jesus arrived to be baptized by his cousin, he had not yet begun his ministry. He really had no need for repentance, yet he still submitted to the waters of baptism.

“While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; with you I am well pleased.”

-CEB and NIV combined

God’s Beloved. That was Jesus’ identity affirmed through his baptism.

God’s Beloved Son, who would now be sent by the Holy Spirit to do the work of God in this world.

From the story of Genesis 1, the Bible reminds us that God named and claimed humanity as beloved children of God. First it was Adam and Eve named as God’s beloved creation in the Garden of Eden. Then it was Abraham and the people Israel claimed as God’s chosen race.

In the waters of his baptism, Jesus was reminded of who he was as God’s Beloved Son.

Then through Jesus, God named and claimed all of humanity as God’s beloved children-Jew and Gentile, male and female, old and young, slave and free.

God names and claims us not because of an ego trip, but because God’s nature is to love. Like a mother who loves the child whom she carries and births and like a father who loves even a wayward son, God loves each and every one of us with abundant and agape love.

God loves us not because of anything we do, but because of who we are in God’s eyes. We are God’s Beloved.

As Walter Harrelson comments,

“God’s love is not quenched when the people of God bring disappointment or sadness to their Lord. God’s love reaches out and will not finally be denied.”

 --Upper Room Disciplines, 1997, p.16

Today, as we remember Jesus’ baptism, we also remember our own baptisms. No matter if we were baptized as infants, children, youth or adults, through our baptisms God says to us: You are my Beloved. You are my sons and my daughters whom I love.

We hear these words. We know God loves us. Yet, how often do we struggle to accept this identity? How often do we struggle to claim this affirmation made at our baptisms?

If you have ever struggled with your identity as God’s Beloved, know that you are not alone.

I have met many men and women over the years that know in their head that God loves them, but in their hearts cannot accept such an identity as God’s Beloved. They cannot fathom that the God of the universe would care for such as them. Human love has failed them, or tried to possess them, or has never been a part of their experience, so they struggle to comprehend how God could possibly love them. Or they are so weighed down with sin or remorse at past sins that they cannot forgive themselves and cannot accept God’s gift of forgiveness and grace.

Our baptisms remind us that we are forgiven. We don’t earn such forgiveness; it is God’s gift of God’s love. Our baptisms also remind us that we are claimed by God. God chooses to love us as Beloved sons and daughters. We then are called to accept our identity as God’s Beloved.

When I think of this struggle to claim our identity, I think of the classic Disney animated movie “The Lion King.” In that movie, Simba, the lion cub, grows up struggling with his identity.

Simba ran away after his father was killed, met up with two sidekicks who taught him to enjoy life for a while, and grew up in the jungle. Yet when his past finds him there, Simba struggles with who he is and who he is meant to be. Rafiki, the shaman mandrill-baboon, does a little bit of magic whereby Simba is staring at the water and hears the voice of his father, Mufasa.

Mufasa says to Simba:

“You have forgotten who you are, and so have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. You must take your place in the Circle of Life.”

Simba replies:

“How can I go back? I'm not who I used to be.”

Mufasa then reminds him:

“Remember who you are. You are my son, and the one true king. Remember who you are.”

--The Lion King script found online

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest and writer, once imagined God’s voice saying to us today:

.."You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love.

I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand and I hold you safe in the shade of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to Me and I belong to you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are."

 -- Henri Nouwen csec.org 5-17-91 “The Life of the Beloved”

Today, as we remember Jesus’ baptism, we also remember our own baptisms. If you are like me, literally that is a bit impossible, as I was only a few weeks old when I was baptized. I cannot remember the actual event of my baptism, but I can remember that I am baptized.

I can remember who I am as God’s Beloved because of the waters of baptism. I can remember that I am forgiven because of the grace of God shown through baptism.

Every time we recall Jesus’ baptism; every time we participate in one another’s baptisms, we are called to remember who and whose we are. As we remember, we are called to have the courage to claim our identity as God’s Beloved. Then, as we claim our identity, we are called to have the courage to live into that identity.

Too often when we seek to identify ourselves, we describe who we are by where we work or who we are related to or our political affiliations or certain cultural labels or by our past mistakes. We are hesitant to describe ourselves as a Christ follower as so many have used Christianity or Christian symbols to show the opposite of the ways of Jesus. Or we are hesitant to publicly claim our identity as God’s Beloved because we see faith as a private, personal matter.

Today, we are called to have the courage to claim our identity as God’s Beloved as our foundational identity. We claim that identity not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

And when we claim our identity, we also claim our forgiven status. And as we claim our forgiven status, we hear God’s call to forgive others. And as we forgive others, we learn how to live by God’s love. And as we learn how to live by God’s love, we trust the Spirit to guide us in how to live as God’s Beloved.

While our sacrament of baptism is only to be administered once in our lifetimes, our status as God’s baptized continues throughout our lives. Today we are called to remember our baptisms as a reminder of who and whose we are as God’s Beloved people in this world today.

Our challenge then becomes not to allow our baptisms to be a one-time event completed and forgotten. Instead our baptisms are to be our launching pads, the first step in our journey to be God’s people in the world.

Yet as Barb Sholis reminds us,

“Inevitably, life has a way of "wringing us out," and we forget that God dwells in and among us.

We forget our "beloved" identity.

Laurence Hull Stookey labels our forgetfulness "spiritual amnesia" but adds that baptism is what counters our amnesia. The touch of water upon our lives helps us recall our place in the biblical story, and reminds us that God's creative force is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us.” --Barbara Sholis in The Christian Century, ’02, found online

This past year has tried to wring us out so that we forget who and whose we are. How do we identify ourselves? How do we define ourselves? How has the foundations of our lives shifted or solidified over the past year? Do we feel like God has abandoned us or that God is still claiming and renewing us? Have we forgotten who and whose we are, or have we leaned into our identity as God’s Beloved?

2021 will be what we make it out to be. Last week we gathered in worship to renew our covenant with God. Today we gather in worship to remember our identity as God’s Beloved.

We have begun this new year in worship not defined by those around us, but defined by our relationships with God through faith in Jesus.

Take heart today!

God is still claiming you as God’s Beloved.

God is still calling you to follow Jesus.

God is still seeking to cleanse you from sin.

God is still commissioning you to new life.

Today, we are called to have the courage to live into our identity as God’s Beloved, following the ways of Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, to do the work of God in this world. Today, we are called to live into our baptismal vows as a way to live as Christ’s followers and God’s Beloved in our world.

Yet be warned—the vows spoken at our baptisms, claimed at confirmation, and reaffirmed when we commit to church membership are not the easiest to live. They take commitment.

They take intentionality. They take the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Led by the Spirit, we are called:

\*To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,

reject the evil powers of this world,

and repent of our sin.

\*To accept the freedom and power God gives us

to resist evil, injustice and oppression

in whatever forms they present themselves.

\*To confess Jesus Christ as our Savior,

put our whole trust in his grace,

and promise to serve him as our Lord,

in union with the church which Christ has opened

to people of all ages, nations and races.

\*To remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church

and serve as Christ’s representatives in the world. -UMH p33ff

As we live into 2021, may we choose to live into our identity as God’s Beloved, and live into these baptismal vows. We cannot change the world, but we can transform our corner of the world. We cannot change others, but we can allow the Holy Spirit to transform us.

May the Holy Spirit work within you, that having been born through water and the Spirit,you may live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Amen.