

## **Be Loved**

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Lent 1, Feb. 26, 2012

Genesis 9: 8-17  
Psalm 25: 1-10  
I Peter 3:18-22  
Mark 1: 9-15

I know this is the first Sunday of Lent, but I am still thinking about something that hit me like a ton of bricks in the previous liturgical season, Advent. For many years I have thought of Jesus as reaching out to people on the margins. I imagined him hanging out with a diverse group of fisherman, tax collectors, religious zealots, even soldiers and sex workers. I imagined him healing people that no one else wanted to get close to. Of course, I included in my imaginings the many women that followed him, some of them backing him financially.

I had this picture in my mind of radical, gracious Jesus reaching out from his middle-classness to the edges of society. It wasn't quite like the 1 percent hanging out with the 99 percent, but it was similar. I mean you have seen the pictures, his robe was always clean and pressed, his long curly hair combed and trimmed. He was royal.

And then after all these years, it hit me. Jesus wasn't the 1 percent, he wasn't even middle class. That's me, I am middle class! Somehow I had transformed Jesus to look like me, to match the work that I do. Oops. How embarrassing.

Jesus was not stretching so far to the margins. He lived on the edge of society. As the poor child of a single mom, Jesus was born in the margins. Galilee was a heavily gentile area, cut off from Jerusalem by Samaria. Theologian Ched Myers describes Jesus' hometown of Nazareth as "Nowhereville." The only thing Nazareth is known for is Jesus.

Some of you might be pondering a small point I glibly skipped over. Let me step back a moment and explain my idea of Jesus as the son of a single mother. At Christmas, we read the stories about young pregnant Mary who is saved from shame by noble Joseph who marries her. The gospel of Luke gives Mary's side of things with the Magnificat and her pregnant cousin Elizabeth. Matthew's gospel tells the story from Joseph's perspective with his dreams as well as his lineage.

Mark – the earliest canonical gospel – gives us just Mary and Jesus. There is no birth narrative at all in Mark. Nowhere in Mark is Joseph named. Jesus just appears on the scene and is baptized. In Mark 6, Jesus returns to his hometown in Galilee and teaches in the synagogue. The people are astounded and wonder how he has come to this wisdom. They ask, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And the people are offended by his teaching.

When I think about Jesus this way, *growing* up without a father, (or maybe Joseph died when Jesus was young given the age difference between Joseph and Mary) Jesus' baptism takes on new meaning. Jesus goes to John at the Jordan River, with lots of other people, and chooses to be baptized. As he comes out of the water, Jesus has a vision of a dove coming from heaven; he hears a voice say, "You are my beloved son. I am well pleased with you."

For those of us who have grown up thinking about God as our "heavenly father" perhaps this doesn't sound radical. But if we imagine Jesus growing up without an earthly father in a patriarchal society where power comes through the father, this experience takes on new significance. Jesus hears and receives this voice of love and

is given strength and courage; he is given what he needs to live into the next phase of his life.

And good thing too, because as Mark tells it, Jesus does not have long to revel in this mystical experience. He is immediately “driven into the wilderness by the Spirit” for 40 days. At least his spiritual quest begins with him knowing that he is beloved, that he is a son, that God is pleased with him.

Jesus comes out of the wilderness, having been accompanied by the wild beasts and angels. The time of testing and preparation is over and he begins his ministry. He gathers disciples, teaches in parables, heals people, gathers crowds and tries to escape crowds by returning to deserted places. In one of his teaching sessions, the beloved rabbi says “that the son of man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” This is not well received by those gathered.

According to Mark’s gospel it is six days after that difficult teaching that Jesus goes to the mountain with his closest disciples. We heard this reading last Sunday. Here on the mountain top, at the top of his game as a teacher, healer and prophet, aware that his “lifestyle” is going to get him in trouble, the voice comes again, “This is my beloved son. Listen to him.” This time, according to Mark, it is not only Jesus that hears the voice; the others hear it as well.

At these crucial moments in his life, perhaps when he is most aware of his humanness, he is given this gift: hearing and understanding that he is loved by his heavenly father. I don’t usually think of Jesus needing to hear that he is loved. He is the

son of God, why would he need to hear that he is loved? And yet his Abba loves him and it makes all the difference.

How much more then, we who are wholly human, need to know that we are loved. It is not only children that receive the blessing of being beloved. We who are struggling to be faithful disciples, we who are wondering if we are disciples, we also need to know that we are loved.

During Lent this year, as we approach the Easter season, we want to listen and read the scriptures with an eye and ear to the theme of covenant. How do we see God reaching out to the world, offering God's own commitment to God's people? How do we see people in the Biblical text reaching back to God?

Similarly, how do we sense God reaching out to us now in the world?

Are there still signs of a great love present in the world?

How do we respond to the love and beauty we see?

How do we reach toward the mystery that is God?

What does it take for us to cling to that mysterious love?

How do we do that as a community?

The Hebrew Bible text today tells us that Noah and his family survived the massive flood with God's protection. When the waters receded and when they came out of the ark, they understood life and even God in a new way. They saw the rainbow and knew it was a covenant. This was a bow that pointed not toward violence, but toward God's promise. Genesis tells us that the rainbow still serves as a reminder, not only to creation, but to God as well, of God's promise never to destroy the earth again.

In Jesus' baptism, the water is a sign of the covenant that Jesus and God make with each other. The water would have been enough; that is all that the others in the Jordan River got. That is all most of us get. But Jesus, attuned to his father in heaven, hears the voice telling him that he is beloved.

In addition, today we are given the text from I Peter that ties baptism and the Noah story together into a nice, neat, salvation package that I confess I don't totally understand. What does become more obvious to me as we put these texts together today is that we are given a very large picture of how God works.

Mark's gospel gives us a description of a very personal experience with God. Many of us grew up with a personal God. The relationship nurtured our faith and helped us to develop into strong, kind people. This kind of relationship is intimate, often indescribable and unique to each person.

Sometimes as we grow and change, what we used to wear comfortably is no longer such a good fit. It is binding and we can't move freely. The relationship with God that felt personal and beautiful now seems common, trite and restricting.

It is helpful to turn back to Genesis and note that God is bigger than the dove that Jesus saw. God is bigger than the voice that Jesus heard. God works in specifics, but God also works in much larger ways. In Genesis, we are told that God makes the covenant in the sky with Noah's family, yes, but also with all of creation. God signs the covenant in and upon creation. The covenant is not just with Noah's family, it is with families yet to be, of all species, the whole world over.

When we are so bold to say that God is only personal, or perhaps that God is not personal at all, we are reminded by these texts that whatever God is, is bigger than we

can imagine. Whatever it is that animates and energizes this world is so hard to describe that we have been trying to do it for thousands of years and have been fighting over it for just as long.

This Lenten season we are reminded once again that we are beloved; as indescribable as God may be, we are each beloved children. We are invited to commit and recommit ourselves to that great mystery even as we live into that Love that holds each of one of us and all of creation.