

January 13, 2019  
Baptism of Our Lord  
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## Beloved and Beautiful

*You are my Son, my Beloved.*

I can never assume what songs everybody knows. I was wrong about “The Rose,” sung by Bette Midler in the late 1970s. I thought everyone knew it. But most of you under 40 shook your head “no” when I asked you if you knew it.

“The Rose” popped up in church right in the middle of a choir anthem. It was in what I call a “mash-up” with the Christmas carol “Lo, How a Rose.” The director of a choral group called Conspirare has created a number of mash-ups, including “Nearer My God to Thee” with “When I Fall in Love.” Or programming “You are So Beautiful” at their Christmas concert. I’m a bit caught off guard and intrigued with these mash-ups. Are they hinting God singing “You are So Beautiful” to us? Or human love infused with divine love? Or that love is love?

Here’s another song from the 1970s that was in a mash-up. It’s by Larry Norman. “We can be together now and forever. I love you, I love you. Hey, can you hear me, I got to have you near me, I love you.” Then, a chorus of “I love, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you.” Repeat.

Let me tell you: that’s more “I love you’s” than I heard the entire first 18 years of my life. I knew I was loved by my parents. I knew I was loved by God. But my humble, rural, German Lutheran ancestors from Nebraska weren’t necessarily huggy or verbally expressive like that. My family started hugging after I went to college, and the “I love you’s” followed gradually. Sometimes we’re still a bit awkward with both. Our phone calls end with a quick, “love, you, bye.” Click.

At Jesus’ baptism, a mysterious voice from heaven thunders this love-filled line: *you are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*

Our reading from Isaiah puts the voice of God in the first person. And you can’t get much more intimate than this: *You are precious in my sight, and I love you.* While in exile, that is God’s word to the Israelites in exile. And God’s message to us as well.

We may be told that we are loved, but it’s another thing to really believe it, right? How many of us have struggled with self-image and whether we are truly good enough, worthy enough, loveable enough, smart enough, rich enough, attractive enough. Then the rough times come and it’s even harder to remain centered. In baptism God declares us beloved children of God, but it takes a lifetime to take in this awesome news—to let it sink deep in our bones—to trust that we are truly precious, that we have all we need, that we are OK just the way God made us.

When we face our exiles or identity crises or insecure moments, Isaiah’s poetry drips with grace for us:

*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.*

As we remember our baptisms today—and celebrate the baptism of Margot at the 11am liturgy—we call to mind parents and sponsors and spiritual mentors who remind us that are truly beloved of God.

Recently, I watched the movie *Beautiful Boy*. Perhaps God looked upon the newborn Jesus as “beautiful boy” and later the emerging adult Jesus as the beautiful, beloved one.

The song *Beautiful Boy* was written by John Lennon and expresses the hope we have for our children. I seem to keep finding songs from about 1980 and here’s another one:

*Out on the ocean sailing away  
I can hardly wait  
To see you come of age  
But I guess we'll both just have to be patient  
Yes, it's a long way to go  
But in the meantime  
Before you cross the street  
Take my hand  
Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans  
Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful  
Beautiful boy*

The movie *Beautiful Boy* is based on the memoirs of a father and a son addicted to crystal meth. It is heartbreaking to see the father's love for his son, and the helplessness he feels as he watches this young man's life fall apart due to a powerful and destructive drug. After living a bit of this story 15 years ago as my ex-partner became addicted to crystal meth, all I can say is this: love endures even when we cannot save or help someone. Sometimes it doesn't seem enough, but I try to trust that Frank is beloved of God, marked with the cross of Christ in life and in death.

That all sounds fine and good you say. But what of those of other creeds or no faith? As Christians, we acknowledge Jesus as Savior, as Messiah, as Beloved One of God. And yet are not all people created in the image of God? Are not all people precious in God's sight and deeply loved?

In such partisan times, we need stories like that of Ilhan Omar, the first Somali American, first Muslim refugee, and first hijab-wearing Muslim woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Ilhan was born in Somalia but fled with her family to Kenya when she was eight. Her family lived in a refugee camp for four years before being resettled in Minneapolis in 1997. In a time when hate and division seem to flourish, the story of Ilhan gives us reason for pride and hope.

Baptism is about identity, but it's also about our vocation and calling.

It's one thing to proclaim to all of you that you are beloved of God. But so are Ilhan and all refugees and immigrants. So are all those hungering for bread or for love. And let us not forget: so are those on the other side of the political divide.

Come to the waters and learn again to look on all people and the earth itself as beloved. Come to the table and let this food and drink change you, transform you, awaken you to who you truly are: beautiful and beloved.