
Beloved is Where you Begin

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Lent 1 – Year A

I got to know Sarah, we'll call her, through Church of the Common Ground, a worshipping community on the streets of Atlanta. Like many parishioners there, Sarah was homeless, and a crack addict, and a seemingly hopeless one at that. And everyone knew it. Every few weeks, she'd come in especially excited, convinced that she'd kicked her habit. But then she'd disappear, for days or weeks, which always meant that she was using again and was ashamed. Eventually, she'd come back. And every time, she'd be welcomed, and received with a love that wasn't contingent upon her being clean or housed. Love that was prior to her success, or her failure. Love that was, in this way, a sacrament of God's love for her.

With time, she came to trust that love, and to trust that she didn't have to earn it and, more important for her, she couldn't undo it. Then one day, years later, when most of us had given up hope she'd ever change, she showed up excited again, with another day clean. And then another. And then another. And another.

Now, I believe this was a miracle, the work of God. But I also believe that she needed to know that she was accepted and beloved, *first*, whether clean and sober or not, before she could really begin the long, hard work of recovery—work that, much like the season of Lent, involves self-examination and confession, battle with demons and temptation, and surrender to God's mercy and power.

“Beloved is where you begin.” That's the title of a Lenten blessing by Jan Richardson, and it goes like this:

If you would enter
Into the wilderness,
Do not begin
Without a blessing.

Do not leave
Without hearing
Who you are:
Beloved,
Named by the One
Who has traveled this path
Before you.

Do not go
Without letting it echo
In your ears,
And if you find
it is hard
To let into your heart,
Do not despair.

That is what
This journey is for. [\[i\]](#)

Though I haven't asked Richardson, I'm convinced that her poem was inspired by Jesus' journey into the wilderness and by what precedes it.

Right before our lectionary picks up this morning, right before the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the desert, he is baptized by his cousin John. As he comes up from the water, the heavens burst open and the Spirit of God descends like a dove and lands on him, and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Then Jesus goes into the wilderness, with these words and this blessing still ringing in his ears. Perhaps it's for that reason that the tempter is determined to have Jesus forget, or doubt, God's love and his identity as God's beloved Son.

"If you are the Son of God," he taunts Jesus, who's starving, "turn these stones into bread." "If you're the Son of God," he says, "throw yourself from this pinnacle." "If you want to be someone," he implies, "if you want to be someone who matters, like the king of kings, forget God and worship me instead."

Jesus resists that temptation. He stays grounded in the blessing of his baptism and the words of His Father, "This is my Son, the beloved."

Beloved is where Jesus began his wilderness sojourn. And it's where we begin, too, though we can be reluctant or scared to believe it—to believe that we are God's beloved, already, and that that is enough.

I've come to recognize, in my own life at least, that this inability or refusal to trust in God's love lies at the heart of so many of my attachments, compulsions, and sins and leads me to look for love and fulfillment in all the wrong places. I recognize that I keep avoiding the darkness and emptiness inside of me, because, on some level, I fear that they are greater than God. I seem to have more faith in my own unworthiness than in God's mercy!

To be sure, we hear a lot about our unworthiness during Lent, along with temptation and sin and death. But we can face these difficult truths because we're grounded in a greater truth: the truth of God's grace and mercy and love.

This is the beginning of our journey, and this is its end, its goal: not to wallow in guilt, not to prove ourselves or improve ourselves, but to remember God's grace and mercy and love, and to let the truth of that love sink down into our hearts and set us free. To remember that there is nothing—neither sin nor death, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation—that can separate us from the love of God.

So as you begin the hard work of Lent, as you enter into the wilderness with Jesus and face temptation and sin, and as you remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return, may you remember also that you are God's beloved. May you remember that beloved is where you begin, and beloved is where you will end, and beloved is what you will always be. And may that give you courage for the journey ahead and courage to return to the God who loves you.

[\[i\]](#) Excerpt from Richardson, "Beloved is where you begin," *Circle of Grace*.