

**Lent 1 Year B 2021**  
**February 21, 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus is God's well-beloved son. As a pastor and theologian, I can be fairly confident of this especially because we've heard reports of voices from heaven declaring this truth about Jesus a whole lot in recent weeks. At the start of Epiphany, a little over a month ago, we celebrated the baptism of our Lord from the Gospel of John, in which a voice from heaven called Jesus well-beloved. Then, just last week at the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John heard a similar voice declare the same thing. Now there's today's gospel reading from Mark, which covers a whole lot of ground to set up Jesus' story in just a few short verses. Most other gospels have enough details to break this up into at least 3 separate stories. But Mark, in wanting to share the good news of Jesus and get the word out quickly, has no time for extra details, or even a proper origin story for Jesus. Instead, we begin Lent at the beginning of Mark's gospel, with Jesus' baptism again. And, just like we've heard in previous weeks, again there is a voice from heaven that declares Jesus is well-beloved. So, we've heard it three times over the last two months, and twice in two weeks. Do we get it yet? Has it sunk in yet that Jesus is beloved? Because this seems to be pretty important information.

Given the recent focus, it could be useful for us to investigate the word "beloved". The word our Bibles translate as "beloved" is, in the original Greek, "agapetos." "Beloved" is a fine translation of this word, except that we don't use the word all that often in our culture. This word, beloved, or *agapetos*, is a very strong form of love. In Greek, the word *agape*, the root of the word *agapetos*, means love, but not just any kind of love. It specifically means unconditional love. This kind of love stands apart from familial love or friendship. So, *agapetos* used in this way means that the person mentioned is one of a kind, and is selflessly, unconditionally, and especially loved. Of course, it's not surprising to hear God speak about Jesus in this way. This is exactly what we'd expect.

We might also expect that God's only, beloved son, who is one of a kind and unconditionally loved should have a pretty easy life. Certainly, that's how it seems to work in today's world. There's a kind of easy life that comes with being able to use a powerful parent's name and reputation to get anything we might need or imagine. It's evident in the fact that many of the wealthiest people in our world *inherited* much of their wealth. And it's evident in the fact that while Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg did drop out of college, their name was worth enough to get them into Harvard in the first place. It seems like most of the self-made billionaires in our world started off as inheritors of millions. And so, since Jesus is the well-beloved Son of God, who is more rich and powerful than any person on this planet, it seems like Jesus should certainly be coasting down Easy Street during his life and ministry. This is what our culture tells us about beloved children with powerful parents.

*Agapetos* is used in other places in the New Testament. But it's used exclusively to refer to Jesus and Christians. The Apostle Paul and other new testament writers use this word when they address their letters. Paul names us as beloved. The same word, *agapetos*, is used to describe Jesus, and you, and me. So, our culture would tell us that we should all be living on Easy Street because of our beloved status.

Of course, we know all too well the pain and suffering in our lives and in this world. But that doesn't stop some Christians from believing that's the way it should be. This idea is called the prosperity gospel, and it says that you can tell who is beloved because they really are on Easy Street. This might not seem like such a problem, other than being bad theology, until we think a

little deeper. If we name success as a sign that certain people are beloved, that says something pretty awful about people who are suffering. Those Christians who follow the prosperity gospel would say that people who are suffering haven't prayed hard enough, haven't given enough money to the church, or aren't real or true Christians. If success is a sign of God's love, then misfortune must be a sign of God's displeasure. And unfortunately, this prosperity gospel has become the dominant Christian voice in our culture. I've sat with people in a hospital room, as a chaplain, who have told me that they knew God had abandoned them. This is what their pastor had told them. God had abandoned them, and they needed to pray harder and believe harder if they wanted to recover. Of course, this isn't how God works.

We all want for our lives to be easier, less complicated, and to be shielded from suffering, temptation, and pain. The prosperity gospel tempts us to believe that we just need to be "good enough Christians" in order to be truly beloved, and then God will simply make all of our problems vanish in a puff of holy smoke.

But we see today that it's not that way for Jesus. After his baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. Despite being well-beloved, Jesus' life is full of temptation, suffering and even death. While it might not be all bad, it's certainly not the Easy Street that the well-beloved sons and daughters of our culture enjoy, and it's nothing like the perfect life on offer by those Christians who attempt to convince us that all our problems could be solved if only we were more faithful.

But there is good news, sisters and brothers. Even though Jesus experiences pain, and temptation, and suffering, and even death, he is *still* declared beloved. Even though Jesus' life is anything but easy, he is truly beloved. Even as Jesus is suffering temptation in the wilderness, our gospel today tells us that he is surrounded by angels who are serving him. As the gospel story continues, Jesus will be provided with twelve friends and disciples, and countless faithful women and men who will provide for his earthly ministry. This title, well-beloved, may not mean Jesus is exempt from the trials, the temptations, even the suffering of this life, but it does carry him through it. The title of beloved carries Jesus through his temptation in the wilderness. And even though being named well-beloved by God doesn't keep Jesus from suffering and dying on a cross, being beloved by God carries Jesus through death and out the other side into new and resurrected life.

And in the waters of baptism, we receive this same title! We are called beloved, not by our action or our faithfulness or our ability to pray, but by God's grace and mercy, and by God's faithfulness. God declares that we are beloved. Just like for Jesus, this doesn't exempt us from the trials of our lives, but it carries us through. God's love carries us through the wilderness places in our lives, through temptation and suffering, even through death and the grave. In baptism, we are joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, and called together to be the church, the Body of Christ for one another and for our suffering world.

So, we are not left alone in the wilderness to contend with the devil and other evils of our world by ourselves. We are working together, we have each other and the promise that we are beloved children of God. My mother-in-law taught all her children as they were growing up and in their own wilderness places, that in baptism God does not guarantee a smooth flight, but we are guaranteed a safe landing. Well-beloved children of God, in our baptism we receive a promise, a promise that God's love will carry us through the wilderness and messy places of our lives. God's love will see us through our times of temptation. And God's love will ultimately carry us through even our own deaths, out the other side, cradled for a smooth landing, into new and resurrected life. Thanks be to God. Amen.