

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 10, 2016)

Texts:

Isaiah 43:1-7 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

But now, Leah and Rachel and Jacob, hear the word of Yahweh---

the One who created you,

the One who fashioned you, Israel:

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the seas, I will be with you; when you pass over the rivers, you will not drown.

Walk through fire, and you will not be singed; walk through flames and you will not be burned.

I am Yahweh, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer. I give Egypt as ransom for you, Nubia and Seba in exchange for you. You are more precious to me than Assyria; you are honored, and I love you.

I will give people in exchange for you, whole nations in exchange for your life.

Have no fear, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east and gather them from the west. To the north I will say, "Give them up!" and to the south, "Do not hold them back!"

Bring my daughters and sons from afar, return them from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my Name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

The people were full of anticipation, wondering in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. John answered them all by saying, "I am baptizing you in water, but someone is coming who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not fit to untie! This One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire. A winnowing fan is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff will be burnt in unquenchable fire."

When all the people were baptized, Jesus also came to be baptized. And while Jesus was praying, the skies opened and the Holy Spirit descended on the Anointed One in visible form, like a dove. A voice from heaven said, "You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favor rests."

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"YOU Are My Beloved!"**

Do you ever wonder what would happen if you were to truly see yourself as a Beloved Child of God? Have you ever considered yourself to be truly Beloved of God? If you were, do you think you would live your life differently? Would the challenges and celebrations and trials and commendations you experience and receive feel differently to you? Would you make different decisions? Would you be able to let things go more easily? Not sweat the small stuff or the big stuff for that matter? Would the people in your life see you differently if you saw yourself as beloved?

Claiming ourselves as beloved in God's sight can take a huge step of faith for many of us. Some of you may already be there, but I know you need reminding. It's so easy to lose touch with our

“belovedness” as we seem to make the same mistakes over and over again or put down the phone or walk away from a conversation wishing so much we had said something different or acted differently towards someone.

Seeing ourselves as beloved doesn't mean that we are protected from every challenging situation or able to make the best decision in every moment or even (or especially) say the right thing at the right time. What it does mean is that we accept ourselves and each other as God accepts us and sees us as truly Beloved and no matter what happens to know that we are held up by and completely surrounded by love.

As I drove to the hospital this week for what seemed like the hundredth or more time to visit our dear Lester, I prayed fervently for a way to reach him, to give him some understanding of the depth of love we, his church family and his partner, Carlos, have for him, AND the all encompassing, powerful love our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer has for him as I was feeling pretty danged powerless as his pastor and his friend to give him the hope and the joy and the feeling of being beloved that he as all of us so greatly need.

Just before I left the office on Thursday night, it had occurred to me to print out today's passage of scripture from Isaiah, but in the old King James Version that I thought Lester would appreciate. Setting it down on the desk in front of me, I took the audacious step of personalizing the text – with a pencil, of course – so that it read....

“But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Lester,

And He who formed you, O Carlos:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by your name;

You are Mine.”

I didn't really know how it would come across to Lester as I sat next to his bed at The City of Hope but as I read these words to him near the end of our visit, he, as I, was overcome with emotion as the realization of how God has been and continues to be with him and with all of us filled that sterile space and brought new understanding of what it means to be God's beloved.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you.

When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,

Nor shall the flame scorch you.”

Through all we go through in life, even when it's the deepest darkest thing we can or can't even imagine, we can know AT all times and IN all times that we are God's beloved and that the One who created us knows us by name and watches over us always.

The sky breaking open above Christ as he stood in the river Jordan on that day so long ago cracked open not only the divide between heaven and earth but the notion that God is anywhere but truly with us, descending upon us, baptizing us in a spirit of grace and love so that we can know wherever we go and through whatever we experience we are beloved and we are a part of God.

As we begin a new year with God, it is always appropriate to return to the scriptures and to these words that serve as eternal reminders to God's grace and God's goodness. In these days of darkness and strife and chaos all over the world we are reminded that not much has changed and in some ways that's a bad thing, but in many ways it's a great thing. For we know that God's love is eternal and never changing and when we read once again the words that cheer our hearts as those

found in Isaiah and in today's Psalm we are reminded that the One who knows all, sees all and is through all is always with us and always will be.

Truly believing that we are the beloved; knowing deep within our souls that come what may, God is for us and nothing can truly be against us we receive again the quenching waters of our baptism. This is the faith that takes us through the deep waters and pulls us to the surface where we once again can feel the light shining on our faces and the voice of God declaring how beloved we truly are.

"This is the power of Baptism," Dr. David Lose wrote in his article this week, "Expecting the Messiah," – that God has opened up the heavens, descended from on high, and come to meet us where we are and as we are... all in order that we might know that we, too, are beloved children of God and that God is well pleased also with us."

Do you know that? Can you get a sense of it deep in your bones and in your very being?

In her article, "Thin Place, Deep Water" Debie Thomas reminds us about what this season of Epiphany is all about and wrestles with the idea of what it is to truly get our connectedness to God and to be God's beloved.

"The word [epiphany] comes from the Greek," she writes. "Epiphaneia," meaning "appearing" or "revealing..." In Celtic Christianity, Epiphany stories are stories of "thin places," places where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal becomes permeable. God parts the curtain, and we catch glimpses of [God's] love, majesty, and power. Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our world, and discover the extraordinary. To look deeply at Jesus, and see God."

But here's the problem with Epiphany as she sees it for herself and I think you, as I, can relate: "I always, always have a choice — and most of the time, I don't want it. I expect God's revelations to bowl me over. I expect the thin places to dominate my landscape, such that I am left choice-less, powerless, sinless. Freed of all doubts, and pulsing with faith.

But no. God has not insulted humanity with so little agency; we get to choose. No matter how many times God shows up, I'm free to ignore [God]. No matter how often [God] calls me Beloved, I can choose self-loathing instead. No matter how many times I remember my baptism, I'm capable of dredging out of the water the very sludge I first threw in. No matter how often I reaffirm my vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, I'm at liberty to reject you and walk away."

Aye, there's the rub! This whole freedom of choice God grants us so freely. Can't you just choose for us? We don't know anything, You decide.

But in the very moment of our baptism, in the very moment of the heavens splitting wide, the flood rising, the fire consuming, we are called to remember that we are Beloved. We are always brought through. We are never alone on the journey. The choice as I see it is to be within it and to be the Beloved ones we were created to be.

For when we feel ourselves beloved we can't help seeing others as beloved as well. And in that moment, in that space, we break open the heavens for one another and create a whole new way of seeing and being that this whole wide world and each one of us needs so desperately. We've needed it in the past and we surely need it as we move forward into the future.

"We practice Epiphany," Ms. Thomas writes. "The challenge is always before us: look again. Look harder. See freshly. Stand in the place that might possibly be thin, and regardless of how jaded you feel, cling to the possibility of surprise. Epiphany is deep water — you can't dip your toes in. You must take a breath and plunge..."

"[there's] only [one] Voice that can tell us who we are and whose we are in this sacred season. Listen. We are God's own. God's children. God's pleasure. Even in the deepest water, we are the Beloved." Amen.