

Sermon for January 9, 2022

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How many of you have ever played a game of Marco Polo in a swimming pool? Whenever you gather a group of teenagers together in the water, it inevitably results in a game of Marco Polo. For those of you unfamiliar with the game, one person is “it” and while keeping their eyes shut, must move their way around the pool trying to find and touch the other people in the pool. To help them do this they cry out “Marco” and the other players must respond “Polo.” The person playing “it” stumbles in the direction of the voices hoping to reach out and find someone. The game is named after a famous explorer and jewel merchant who would set out on his adventures unsure of where he was headed, hopeful of where the journey may lead.

As a youth director for over 20 years, I have played a gazillion games of Marco Polo. Even with all that experience, however, I can confidently say I am not very good at it. For one, my short stature means that unlike those that can walk across the bottom of the pool in their search, I have to tread water to keep afloat the whole game or play with my head underwater. I have, however, developed a strategy. Listen for the voice of the youth group member most likely to show mercy and offer compassion. Find the voice of the one who will see your struggle and willingly reach out their arms and let you find them. There are those that will dart out of reach, disguise their voice to mislead, cheat and stand on the edge of the pool – instead I hone in on the voice of the one who will save me. I cry out “Marco” and listen for a very specific “polo” or I would be eternally “it,” destined to a life of crying out and blindly feeling my way through the waters.

Life recently has felt like an endless game of Marco Polo. The waters feel deep. We are tired of treading. Unsure of the path we are on, we have each taken our turn crying out. The voices around us are many but can sound distrustful, misleading, uncertain...or they are simply crying out in the same desperate search that echoes our own. We long to hear the voice of mercy and compassion. We long to hear the voice of the one who will reach out his arms and willing be found...who will save us. We come again to listen for the voice of the Lord in these deep waters.

In today’s scripture readings we hear this voice. Unlike many of the scripture texts that tell us about God through the voice of others, in our Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah today God’s speaks directly. We hear the voice of God say “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine.” These words are initially spoken to a people in exile, wandering in deep waters alone, crying out, surrounded by distrustful, misleading voices, uncertain of the path ahead. God speaks not only to provide comfort but to bring about a new creation. God creates a new reality for the people in the voicing of this Word.

We have heard the story from Genesis 1 over and over again..."In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...Then God said..." Then God said. And with each Word God speaks a new reality is created. God's voice has the power to shape creation. God's voice in our Isaiah text today holds that same creative power. "I have redeemed you...you are mine." The words are not simply a comfort, they do something, they shape who we are. We continue to hear the voice of the Lord creating and forming us through these words today. God's voice is more than words on a page, it is an active Word, alive and at work creating and forming us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. "I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. You are precious in my sight and I love you." Hear the voice recreate and reform you again today.

In our Gospel reading we get to hear the direct voice of God once more. Jesus, the Word made flesh, has come to dwell among us. And only chapters after his birth, we read that as all the people were baptized, Jesus shows up and joins the crowd, being baptized as well. As the people, recognizing their sin, enter into the waters, Jesus goes with them. And as this Living Word shares in the same act of baptism, the voice of God breaks forth from the heavens "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." As the people stand in those waters with Jesus, the voice of God speaks to this new creation - the Son, the Beloved in human form, stands alongside human sin and brings about redemption. And because Jesus stands in these waters alongside the people, we too are able to hear these words spoken to us "You are my child, beloved; with you I am well pleased."

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you." In fact the waters will become a means of God's grace. Baptism- an act of God, a watermark on your forehead, marking God's new creation and the new reality shaping and forming who you are in Christ.

The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice...a voice of mercy and compassion, a saving voice.

"Marco...Pollo" A lot of voices speak words that vie for our attention, offer us alternative paths, and threaten to shape our sense of reality and self. But one voice, the voice of the one who stands in the waters with us, responds to our cries, longing to draw us in and speak creative, forming, life giving truth into our ears. "Beloved, you are mine." God said.