

Will you pray with me?

Holy God, we come before you just as we are. Be with us, we pray. Receive the words that we speak and the thoughts that we think. May these words and thoughts please you and may they bring us closer to your spirit. Amen.

Let me tell you a story. It is not my story. In fact, at this point the story is third hand. I read Rev. Jan Richardson's version of the story, and she heard the story from one of her mentors and friends the Rev. Janet Wolf who served as the pastor of Hobson United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Rev. Richardson tells this story so eloquently that I have done little to change it as I share it with you all today.

Let me tell you a little bit about Hobson United Methodist Church. It's one of those wildly diverse congregations that includes "people with power and PhDs and folks who have never gone past third grade; folks with two houses and folks living on the streets. And, as one person who struggles

with mental health described it: "those of us who are crazy and those who think they're not."

Years ago, a woman named Fayette found her way to Hobson United Methodist Church. Fayette lived with mental illness and lupus and without a home. She joined a new member class. In this new member class, the conversation about baptism especially grabbed Fayette's imagination. Rev. Janet tells of how, during the class, Fayette would ask again and again: "And when I'm baptized, I am...."

The class learned to respond, "Beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold."

"Oh, yes!" Fayette would say, and the class could go back to their discussion.

At last, the day of Fayette's baptism came. And this is how Rev. Janet describes it: Fayette went under, came up spluttering, and cried, "And now I am...." And the whole congregation sang,

“Beloved, precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.”

“Oh, yes!” Fayette shouted! And she danced all around the fellowship hall. Beloved. Precious child of God. And beautiful to behold.

Two months later, Janet received a phone call. The kind of phone call one hopes never to get. Fayette had been beaten and raped and was at the county hospital. So Rev. Janet went. When she entered the hospital’s Emergency Department, she spotted Fayette from a distance, pacing back and forth in one of the rooms. When Janet got to the door, she heard, “I am beloved....” That’s when Fayette turned and saw Janet and said, “I am beloved, precious child of God, and....” Catching sight of herself in the mirror -- hair sticking up, blood and tears streaking her face, dress torn, dirty, and rebuttoned askew, she started again, “I am beloved, precious child of God, and....” She looked in the mirror again and declared, “...and God is still working on me. If you come back

tomorrow, I’ll be so beautiful, I’ll take your breath away!”

[PAUSE]

Beloved. Precious child of God. And Beautiful to behold.

[PAUSE]

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.

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

Isaiah spoke these words to a people in exile -- a people without a home, without a sense of unity or purpose, a people who, in many ways were without hope. These verses do not promise the

Israelites a past or a future without hardship or danger. They do not promise a life of riches and ease. They do not promise a solution to all the people's problems, to their woes. They do not even promise a way home. But they DO promise God's presence, God's comfort, God's love and hope. They DO promise a reunification. They DO promise that God has not forgotten them.

How often do we feel forgotten? How often do we, like Jesus on the cross, want to cry out, My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? How often do we, like the Israelites wonder what good this God is to any of us? See, we, like the Israelites, all too easily forget God's promises. We have forgotten the promise and the good news of our baptism. Not the promise that we will not suffer. Not the promise that we will not face tragedy or loss. But the promise that we are not alone. The promise that no matter what happens to us, no matter what we do, we are still beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold.

It is for good reason that we read these verses from Isaiah alongside the story of Jesus' baptism.

Now, I do not believe that one must be baptized

in order to be part of God's family. I do not believe that God draws such clear delineations between those who are in and those who are out -- we do that, not God.

But somehow through our baptism, God's claim on us shifts. Baptism is indeed, to use the Rev. Janet Wolf's words, that "holy moment when we are named by God's grace with such power that it won't come undone." Sometimes we need an outward sign of the inward gifts God has already given. Sometimes we need the outward sign of water to accept and believe that God's Spirit has washed over us, that God has called us by name. Sometimes we need that outward sign to begin to feel and accept in our bodies that we are beloved, a precious child of God, and beautiful to behold.

See, I believe that Fayette was always those things, but when she was baptized, she was able to receive and understand and believe this in a new way. And she had witnesses to God's claim on her life. She had witnesses who could tell her that she was indeed beloved, precious child of God and beautiful to behold.

And no, her baptism did not save her from the waters. It did not save her from the fire. But golly if Fayette didn't know and couldn't claim that GOD WAS WITH HER THE WHOLE TIME. And no matter what. No matter what happened to her. No matter what she did She was and would always be Beloved. Precious child of God and beautiful to behold. Fayette understood that she had been named by God's grace with such power that it COULD NOT BE UNDONE.

This is good news for all of us. Each of us has been named by God's grace with such power that it cannot be undone.

You are beloved. A precious child of God and beautiful to behold.

Now I want you to do something that's on the touchy feely side of things. I want you to turn to someone who's sitting next to you and say to them: "You are beloved. A precious child of God and beautiful to behold."

Let us pray.

Holy God. Life is not easy -- not always filled with joy and peace. We face hardships and tragedy. Loss and disappointment with others and with

ourselves. AND YET. YET here you are always ready with the promise of forgiveness and grace.

You call us each by name. You call us each beloved, your precious children. Help us to carry this knowledge with us more deeply. Allow it to seep into our very beings. And help us to acknowledge that this is true not only of us but of each of our human siblings -- each of us beloved. Each your precious child and beautiful to behold.

May it be so. Amen.