

Naming Rights

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:21-22

I never feel less competent than when in the bosom of my loving family. Having just spent some time with my siblings as we celebrated my mother's 83rd birthday, I was reminded again of how our nearest and dearest are surpassed by no one else when it comes to the knowledge of our weaknesses and shortcomings, thirty-year-old failures, and spectacular embarrassments. . . or their willingness to share these. We hadn't been in my mother's home ten minutes before someone made reference to the expressed desire of my tenth-grade self to be "tough, cool, and groovy," as well as recalling some of the strategies I employed to get there. Well.

What is your name? And who gave it to you? What does it say about who you are? Our names are important markers of our identity. They tell us some things about who we are and who our family is. I enjoyed reading about your names when I sent this question out on Facebook this week. Many of you were named for family members or close friends; some were specifically chosen because they were biblical names. Some of you know the literal meaning of your name: valiant, faithful, beautiful, song bird, battle maiden.

Remembering the baptism of Jesus provides a perfect opportunity to remember our essential identity and our unconditional worthiness in God's family. The gifts of name and family call us to love, deep and wide and without fear.

To understand the meaning of Jesus' baptism and our own, we go even further back into sacred story, to God's chosen people at a particularly difficult time in their history. Arrogance and self-reliance had made them move far away from God; they gave little thought to living God's way. A crisis was invoked when hostile Babylon invaded, ransacked Jerusalem, and scattered many of them into exile. The prophet named the people's sinfulness and God's judgment, but that was not God's only message. There was something under and beyond all of that; something unshakeable and determinative. Something which even amid devastating circumstances – caused at least in part by their own actions and choices—became a source of hope and new purpose. Listen for God's Word in the reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in the 43rd chapter at the first verse. [ISAIAH 43:1-7]

This powerful text is almost shockingly intimate. Through the voice of the prophet, God professes a creative, protective, and redemptive relationship with those who are "precious and honored" in God's sight. Picture yourself as a recipient of this gift; hear God saying "I love you". *to you*. We - every one of us---belong to God. God created us, God named us, and God promises to be with us even when the way takes us through the deep waters of confusion and chaos, or the fires of danger and hurt.

This is almost always hard for us to grasp. A minister who I admire tells of preaching on this text. To drive home the point that we are not simply individuals, isolated and alone, she repeated the phrase "We are all God's" throughout the sermon. After the first service, one of the church members who was an outspoken critic, shook her hand enthusiastically. "Terrific sermon, pastor! You finally got it right---what I've been trying to tell you all this time. That one line said it all: we are all gods. Everyone of us is a god. There is no one big god who is better than the rest of us. We are all gods ourselves." Needless to say, the minister quickly changed the repeated line in her sermon for the next service to "We all belong to God." [*Journal for Preachers, Advent 2009, "The Preacher," by Lillian Daniel, slightly edited*]

God's particular love for us is hard to take hold of when we put ourselves at the center of the universe. It is hard to believe when we imagine that everything rides on human shoulders. Often we define ourselves by something outside ourselves: our work, where we live, our socio-economic status, our home and family. Like the Israelites of old, we forget God. Like the teenager, we try to build a self based on cultural norms and expectations.

And we wonder why it never seems like enough. Could it be, friends, that we don't know who we are because we forget WHOSE we are?

I have called you by name, says the Creator and Ruler of the universe. *You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you*. Remember that this naming took place before the people repented; before they returned to the worship of God alone. Our core identity, what makes us who we are at the heart of everything else, is the reality that we are children of God. Beloved---not by right or righteousness---but by the unfathomable, illimitable love of the Holy One. The waters of baptism nourish and support us, no matter what we have done, no matter what we have left undone, no matter what will happen in the future. You are God's beloved. I think if we believed that, really took it in, and trusted its truth, it would change us. It would confirm not only our identity and infinite worth, but also the purpose of our life.

Because, you see, it's not just about us. Even though the Isaiah text is addressed to the people of Israel, the scope widens to include sons and daughters from far away to the ends of the earth. We hear in these ancient words the ones given at the institution of the Lord's Supper: *People will come from east and west and from south and north.* A vision of universal homecoming; God's realm where people are welcomed at a table spread for all, all God's beloved, who God created for glory, who God formed and made.

To the church has been given the sacred task of sharing that good news. To greet the face that looks back at you in the mirror each morning: Maybe you'll become tough, cool and groovy, but for sure you are God's beloved. To see the familiar faces of our family members, friends and colleagues, the strangers we encounter and nameless ones in newspaper photographs—and remember: you are God's beloved. A minister colleague in another city encourages parents to say the baptism blessing to their children when they tuck them in at night and when they leave home for school or college or work, as an antidote to all the contradictory messages they'll get, all the glittering gods which will compete for their loyalty: *You are a child of God, and nothing can ever make that not true.* You are a child of God.

Friends, we gather here on the threshold of a new year. Eric reminded us last week that life is a journey, and we are travelers. We don't know where the path will take us, as individuals or as a congregation. So it seems good to remind each other of our blessed and beautiful names, that this is our family, and that we are God's beloved. The waters of our baptism commission us to share that blessing wherever we go, whatever else we do.

Let us pray: The world is yours, gracious God, and all people live by your faithfulness. Watch over us as we travel into this new year. May we be careful, but not afraid; purposive, but not blind to the meaning and miracles along the way. Wherever we wander in your spacious world, teach us that we never journey beyond your loving care; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

RENEWAL OF BAPTISM COVENANT

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light.

Sisters and brothers, baptism is the sign and seal of our cleansing from sin and of our being welcomed into God's family. Through Christ, the power of sin was broken and God's kingdom entered our world. We are citizens of that kingdom and members of God's family.

Those who have been baptized are invited to re-affirm their promises. Those who have never been baptized are also invited to affirm their identity as God's beloved children.

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? [I DO] Do you turn to Jesus Christ, and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? [I DO] With God's help, will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? [I WILL]

With the whole church in every time and place, let us confess our faith, using the ecumenical version of the Apostles' Creed, found on page 14 of the hymnal [APOSTLES' CREED]

POUR WATER INTO FONT

Gracious God, we give you thanks, for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water. In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos, calling forth order and life. In the time of Noah, you destroyed evil by the waters of the flood, giving righteousness a new beginning. You led Israel out of slavery, through the waters of the sea, into freedom and the promised land. In the waters of Jordan Jesus was baptized by John and anointed with your spirit. Through Christ you have named us your children and sealed us in eternal love. Now may we walk in faithfulness and fearlessness, to bless each other and the world you have redeemed, confident that you will be with us, come what may, in life and in death; we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Those who wish may come forward to be touched with water as a reminder of your name and family. Please let an usher or elder know if you wish a minister to come to you.

[_____, YOU ARE GOD'S BELOVED CHILD]