

"CALLED BY NAME"
Isaiah 43:1-7 Luke 3:15-22
January 13, 2019
York Center Church of the Brethren
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On the count of three I would like you to say your whole name out loud.
Ready? One. Two Three.

Do you like your name? Would you change it if you could? After Marty and I got married, several people asked me why I didn't change my name. I replied, "I have always liked the name 'Christy.'"

When I was young my family called me "Chris." When my nephew, Christopher, came along there was some confusion with two "Chrises" in the family. When I was licensed to ministry and people saw my name as "Chris" they assumed I was a guy. So I started using "Christy" to make sure they knew I was female AND a minister.

Our names are pretty important. They set us apart from other people (unless you are one of George Foreman's many sons who are all named George). Our parents chose our names for a reason- maybe we were named after a family member. Maybe they just liked the sound of it. Do you know why your parents chose your name? My parents almost named me "Sally." I am glad they chose "Christy."

When someone calls us by name we know that they know who we are. And that is important to us. Being called by name establishes a relationship. Our names are valuable to us and to those who love us. That is why I get so annoyed when a telemarketer calls me by my first name as if they know me. It is a pathetic attempt at making an artificial connection.

Have you ever wondered why there are so many names in the Bible? Some are more pronounceable than others. There are so many names that those who aren't named catch our attention. [The woman at the well. The Syrophonecian woman. The unnamed woman who anoints Jesus. The man blind from birth.] Notice how those who are unnamed are almost always women? There is a reason for that. When the scriptures were written women were considered to be the property of their fathers or husbands. They were unimportant. They had very little value. They weren't worth naming. Saying your name gives you power. It confirms your identity. It gives you value.

Of course, people can say our names in a derogatory way. That's what bullies do- they try to use your name to hurt you.

The long lists of names in the Bible tell us a lot about God and about the people of God. They tell us that God calls us by name: Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, Ruth, Naomi, Jacob, Rachel, Hannah, Samuel. Peter, John, Andrew, Mary, Martha. This is the God who knows your name. The God who remembers you. The God who really knows who you are.

I love this text from the prophet Isaiah. *"But now thus says the Lord, the One who created you, the One who formed you. Do not fear, I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."*

Hear this passage from The Message.

*1-4 But now, God's Message,
the God who made you in the first place, Jacob,
the One who got you started, Israel:
"Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you.
I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end—
Because I am God, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Savior.
I paid a huge price for you:
all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in!
That's how much you mean to me!
That's how much I love you!
I'd sell off the whole world to get you back,
trade the creation just for you.*

*5-7 "So don't be afraid: I'm with you.
I'll round up all your scattered children,
pull them in from east and west.
I'll send orders north and south:
'Send them back.
Return my sons from distant lands,
my daughters from faraway places.
I want them back, every last one who bears my name,
every man, woman, and child
Whom I created for my glory,
yes, personally formed and made each one.'"*

Isn't that an amazing message? Now imagine that you are hearing these words while bloodied, bruised, and beleaguered, living in exile, basically a prisoner in Babylon. You have been dragged from your home by the conquering army. Since your defeat all you have been hearing from God's prophets are words of judgment, because, you have to admit, you really screwed up. The people of God tore their covenant with God into tiny pieces. They mistreated the poor, tolerated corruption in the Temple, and turned their backs on the God who speaks their name. In the words of theologian Claus Westermann you are "*a tiny, miserable, and insignificant band of uprooted men and women standing on the margins of a hostile empire.*"

You are a broken and hopeless people "*living between a dead past and a future not yet born.*" (Eric Hobsbawm) You barely even remember your own name, let alone your identity. You no longer know **who** you are or **whose** you are. And then, suddenly, into the bleak silence of exile and despair comes the voice of God through the prophet.

"*Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You are mine.*" Here is the voice of God, calling to you. Here is God's promise of wholeness; God's promise of a future spoken to people who messed up; people who gave into evil; people who didn't really deserve a second chance. These are the people who hear that they are valued and honored by God. They have not been forgotten. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? It isn't over. We still belong to God. God's words of comfort and forgiveness are greater than Israel's sin and defeat. They get another chance.

This is a remarkable message to an undeserving people. And it says more about God than it does about the people. God never gives up on us. That is grace. And that grace came to earth in human form in the person of Jesus.

We just spent several weeks preparing to celebrate his birth and now we find him as a fully grown adult standing on the banks of the river. Our text from the Gospel of Luke is an important one about identity- his, God's, and ours.

We begin, like we did in Advent, with John who was preaching, baptizing, and gathering disciples. People were so impressed with him that they began to ask if he was actually the Messiah they were waiting for. You can see how they would think that. John was raising a ruckus, speaking out against the evil in the world; challenging the religious authorities; demanding that the people say they are sorry for all the wrong they have done and turn back to God. He was speaking truth to power in a way that had not heard for a very long time. They were hoping that maybe their long wait was over. Maybe he was the one who came to set them free.

John knew who he was and who he wasn't. He was very clear about his identity. He knew his role and his limitations. His job was to prepare the way for the One who was more powerful. His job was important but he didn't claim to be more than he was. "You think **I'm** something," he told them. "Just wait until you see who is coming. I am nothing compared to him!"

Now we come to an interesting interlude in verse 18. Herod Antipas intrudes on our story. He was the son of Herod the Great who terrorized the world when Jesus was a baby. John announced that Herod was an evil king and he criticized him for having an affair with his sister-in-law. Herod was so angry he threw John in prison. We know the Gospel writers weren't interested in chronological accuracy. So we don't actually know if John was imprisoned before Jesus showed up at the river. And if he was, then I wonder, who baptized Jesus? Surprised? Matthew and Mark are very clear that Jesus was baptized by John. And the Gospel of John implies it. But Luke isn't so clear. If John was in prison, then we don't know who baptized Jesus.

What this tells us is that, for Luke, the most important part of this story is that Jesus was baptized, not who did the baptizing. In this way Luke moves the spotlight from John to Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus just lined up with everyone else and he was baptized like they were.

Luke's focus is on what happened **after** Jesus came up out of the water. The first thing Jesus did was to pray. Jesus prays a lot in Luke's Gospel. While Jesus was praying something amazing happened- the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and landed on him, and a voice came from heaven. The voice spoke only to Jesus and said, "*You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.*" In that moment God confirmed Jesus's identity as the Messiah, the One through whom God is acting in history. It is a life changing moment for Jesus. As all heaven breaks loose his purpose and ministry begin. These words of affirmation will sustain Jesus throughout the joys and the sorrows of his ministry.

Not only is the identity of Jesus revealed, but through him we see also the identity of God. One theologian writes, "*If Jesus the Messiah is the one in whom God has chosen to dwell and reveal God's self, then we can know God through Jesus. Through Jesus we know that God loves the physical and material world.*"

The God we know in and through Jesus is the God of history and is an active agent in history.

This God shares the messiness of humanity, and suffers with humanity in order to bring redemption and salvation. Through the prism of Jesus we see the brilliance of a God whose power shines through love and persuasion and not through coercion. In

Jesus the Messiah we know of a God who has taken the form of weakness in order to confound the mighty and strong of this world. God in Jesus, the Son of God, is at work through the Spirit, raising new voices, empowering people, and nurturing their hopes. The God we know in Jesus is a God of a new tomorrow whose power is already at work in the world, and faithfully born in Jesus." (1)

This is the God who calls us, claims us, knows us, and loves us. What we learn through the prophet Isaiah and through Jesus is that our relationship with God is one we cannot destroy. We can neglect it, deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we cannot destroy it because God loves us too deeply and too completely to ever let us go.

The words Jesus heard at his baptism are also the words we hear, "You are my son. You are my daughter. You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased." These are life-giving, life-changing words that everyone human being should hear. And I believe that is one reason we come to worship. And I believe it is one reason why it is important for us to come to worship on a regular basis.

It seems as though much of our experience in the world demeans our identity, makes us question who we are, makes us forget our own name. We gather in this family of faith, each week, to help us to remember, to affirm one another, and to be challenged to claim our identity. In worship and in fellowship we remind each other **whowe** are and **whose** we are. It is in this place that we share our hopes and our dreams; our fears and our sorrows. It is here that we celebrate and use our gifts; and do all we can to make this world a better place.

When we aren't sure who we are or where we belong our sisters and brothers in faith will speak our name, call us beloved, and remind us of our purpose in this life.

In case you need a reminder: We are so glad you are here!

You are God's beloved child, called and sent to make a difference in the world. And God is so pleased with you!

Amen.

End Notes:

- *FEASTING ON THE GOSPELS, "Theological Perspective," by Eleazar S. Fernandez. Westminster John Knox Press. Pg. 82.*