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Isaiah 43:1-7; **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Like many parents, when we knew we were going to have a baby, we began to contemplate names. We bought baby name books and poured over the lists from A to Z. We sifted through the possible family names available. We each made our own lists of favorites and then compared them, which was then followed by the inevitable debates of trying to convince the other to accept some name they wanted to reject. Parents do this because they know that names matter. A person's name is an identity he or she will need to wear for their entire lives. And in some cases, a person's name can even *shape* a person's life—for good or for ill. We've all heard about those situations when parents bestow some kind of dreadful name upon a child, like "Justin Case" or "Paige Turner." Names like that have got to shape someone's life. Or situations where a name carries with it certain expectations: Rockefeller or Kennedy, for example. Names are all about identity—about who we are.

This is why baptism is important. Baptism is all about identity—our identity. Baptism is about an identity that declares *whose* we are and an identity that will shape *who* we are.

We see this right with Jesus' own baptism. Jesus comes up out of the water, dripping wet from his own immersion experience, and God declares "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Right away we understand that baptism bestows an identity. We know who Jesus is: he is God's son. He belongs to God. His

name is "Beloved." And as we read through the rest of Luke's gospel, we will come to learn how this identity as God's son, as God's "beloved" shapes him and his life.

And so it is for each one of us. Today as we recall Jesus' baptism, we are invited to reflect upon our own baptism and its meaning in our lives. Many of us may not remember the actual day of our baptism. But that is less important than recalling what baptism means in our lives. Just as with Jesus, we celebrate that baptism is the bestowing upon us of an identity. We also belong to God. We also have been claimed by God. And we also have been given a name: beloved.

Have you ever noticed something that happens at a baptism. When the individual, often a baby but it could also be a youth or an adult, when the individual is baptized, the pastor says their name: "Mary Elizabeth, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." I used to think it was odd that the pastor only said the person's first and middle names but never their last name. Why was that I wondered? Until it dawned on me what was going on. Last names are our family name, right? They tell people what family we belong to: the Smith family, the Johnson family, the Green family. But when we are baptized, we are made part of a much bigger family: we are made part of the household of God. In a sense, at baptism we are all given a new last name: beloved of God. Mary Elizabeth, beloved of God. Our identity is now shaped and formed by being members of God's family.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of this when he shares with us God's words of salvation to the people of Israel. God says, "I have called you by name; you are mine." This passage from Isaiah is such a beautiful one because it underscores God's complete and utter devotion to us. God claims us. God loves us. God is devoted to us.

You know, there are lots of ways we fail in life. There are lots of ways we fail other people. Our marriages fail. We aggravate our children. We disappoint our parents. We mess up at work. We fail ourselves. But in baptism we recall that nothing we do or fail to do can end God's love for us.

David Lose, preaching professor at Luther Seminary in Minnesota, notes that "Our relationship with God . . . is the one relationship in life we can't screw up precisely because we did not establish it." He goes on to add that, "We can neglect this relationship, we can deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we cannot destroy it for God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go."

What this underscores is that baptism is God's work not primarily ours. That's why we Presbyterians will baptize any one of any age, from infant to adult. You see, baptism teaches us that we did not initiate the relationship. God did. Long before we understood enough to say yes to God, God said yes to us. Baptism is about God's holy work of claiming us and loving us.

If we picked up the rest of Luke's gospel and continued reading after the story of Jesus' baptism, then we would begin to also understand the role baptism has in shaping *who* he was to be. Jesus gets up out of the waters of baptism and goes to live out his identity. He taught about God's love. He touched outcasts and social pariahs. He healed people who were sick in body, mind, and spirit. He forgave. He fed. Women, children and others considered nobodies in society received his attention and care. He stood up against injustice. And he gave his life as an offering of love. And along the way, he experienced temptations to deny who he was, to deny his baptismal identity. But he did

not. In short, this special identity shaped his life. He was the Christ, God's anointed one, the one sent to shepherd the lost sheep and to show them the way back home.

Baptism not only declares *whose* we are, it also states *who* we are. We are disciples of Christ. We, too, have been shaped by our baptismal identity. Our having been claimed by God now bestows a special calling upon us. Our lives are supposed to be shaped by the identity we wear.

You know, with some families, there is an expectation of behavior that comes with the family name. The teenager gets ready to go out for the night with friends and the mother or the father states, "Remember who you are." Remember who you are.

Baptism does come with the expectation that we remember who we are and that we then conduct ourselves accordingly. Unfortunately, some people have misunderstood this to mean they were expected to live lives of moral perfection and superiority. That's not the intention of baptism. Baptism calls us to remember who we are so that we may conduct ourselves after the manner of Christ. That means we are supposed to make love the single most important goal of our lives—not just the emotional kind of love but the love that cares about the welfare of another even when you don't like the other. It means forgiving and sharing and raising our voices against injustice. It means we offer compassion and generosity and service. It means we give ourselves away.

Remember who you are. Beloved of God. Remember whose you are. Disciples of love. And if we were to do these two things well, then maybe the words from that song would be true: "They will know we are Christians by our love."