



Sermon

Isaiah 43:1-7 / Luke 3:15-22

January 10, 2010

Baptism of the Lord

The Baptism of Henry Finn Richards

Historic St. George's United Methodist Church

Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Called by Name

But now, God's Message, the God who made you in the first place ... the One who got you started, Israel: "Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called your name.

– Isaiah 43:1-3, *The Message*

If you've ever visited the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, you know you've seen a monument like no other. There's no grand building or statues of heroic figures, no image of the triumphantly waving flags and banners unfurled. No grand Corinthian columns or pointy obelisk aiming heavenward. There's no edifice complex, if you get my pun. Just slabs; black granite rising and falling from the landscape, with tens of thousands of names carved in the stone, reflecting the scenes of the capital mall. Tens of thousands of names, serving as a mirror for all the people who come there to remember.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial, explained why her stunning work has such a strong grip on the emotions of Americans. "It's the names," she says. "It's all in the names. I meant for the names to be the real memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names."

Maya Lin has it right. I knew a man, a salesman who had a knack for remembering names, a trick he learned from the Dale Carnegie course. He was always after me to take this course because a minister should be at least as good with names as a salesman. I wish I were better with names. You?

Nowadays, in the digital age, we're as likely to be asked for our numbers as our names. Account

numbers. Social Security number. Bar codes. Driver's license number. Confirmation numbers.

Among God's most winsome attributes is the Lord does *NOT* substitute numbers for names. "I have called you by name, you are mine, says God." According to Isaiah, the fact that God named Israel makes all the difference in the world. A name, "Israel" reminds the wandering Hebrews of their divine origin, of being created and formed by Yahweh.

"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." (Isaiah 43:1-3) God's calling Israel by name is meant to banish fear and announce redemption. It offers God's protecting hand in fire and flood.

God woos Israel with a declaration of covenant love and says: Israel you are "precious" and "honored" in my sight. "I love you," God says, in calling Israel by name.

Remember how, in the garden by Jesus' tomb, Mary Magdalene – the first to recognize Jesus as risen and alive – thinks he is just the gardener until he calls her name? "Mary!" Jesus says, the way only he could pronounce it. Just one more instance of how, in the Bible, being called by name is a rich, powerful gift.

Back to Isaiah... The promises and privileges that come with a name stake a claim. Yahweh goes on to remind Israel that their name bears his name. The prophet speaks of God bringing

back everyone she has called by name. From north, south, east and west – everyone, from every direction who “I created, whom I formed and made” says Mother/Father God.

It's a little like having both a given and family name. The first name, in my case, “Fred,” makes me special because I'm me. Ah! But the second, the family name, “Day,” tells me not only that I'm me, but that I'm connected to the lines of my father and mother. I'm connected to a heritage I carry with me. I'm not sure us Euro-Americans, or latter generation Americans from various cultures, do as well with heritage matters as native Americans and Africans, whose indigenous religious practices include ancestor veneration, a deep and spiritual acknowledgement of accountability. These cultures talk about not wanting to offend their “old ones” – the names of their forbears.

Names tell us we are loved and call us to accountability. What greater accountability can there be than to know we are called by God's name, created for God's glory?

Names play another role in the Bible. There are names and there are NAMES. Some of what a person might think are the big, important, stand-out celebrity names in the Bible are little more than historical markers for the real players.

A few weeks ago, we heard Jesus' birth stories boasting names like Emperor Augustus and Quirinius, Governor of Syria, in the forefront of lesser names: Mary and Joseph from Nazareth and Bethlehem. The chapter we read from today, Luke, does it again: a roll call of big shots. Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, Herod, Prince of Galilee, and Philip prince of Iturea and Trachonitis.

But then he says “the word of God came (not to any of them, but to) John the son of Zechariah (who?) in the wilderness.” The word did NOT come to those with names, titles and pomposity, but to a no-account wanderer in the wilderness! The difference – his name had been God-bestowed with an angel's promise that this John would be great in the eyes of the Lord. (Luke 1:15) Why, it's Isaiah's Israel effect all over again.

In a world of TV celebrity gossip shows cluttering the airwaves after the evening, where the best that can be said of BIG name celebrities is the ability to keep their clothes on and their excesses under control, it is worth remembering God has another list. A list chosen not by whose arrow is pointing up or down, or who's hot or who's not, but measured by and for faithfulness to God's purposes of healing and redeeming the world, the blind seeing, the lame dancing, the deaf hearing and everyone studying war no more. A new creation.

Which brings us to Jesus and baptism... Jesus, standing in the water with a crowd who press in from the banks of the Jordan River – it is the day of his baptism. It has been 20 years since that day he worried Mary and Joseph sick, fearing he was lost, when they finally found him in the temple engaging the teachers with youthful wisdom. The last we heard, he was growing up just fine in Nazareth, learning the carpentry trade from his father and cared for by his mother.

Now he begins his public ministry and it opens with a baptism, a humble baptism that identifies with the people he has come to redeem.

It is out of this act of humility that Epiphany comes and baptism happens. Not just then but now. Not just Jesus' baptism but yours, mine and Henry's, happening in just a few moments. Above the waters, heaven's glory opens like a womb giving birth, God's Spirit descends upon Jesus as it seeks to descend, touch and grow in all of us. And Yahweh does just what Isaiah says, names him: “You are my child, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Luke doesn't say everything Isaiah said, but it would be true and memorable in Jesus' life just as it wants to be true and memorable in ours: “Beloved, 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.”

There's nothing more important for any of us to hear than our name. Except maybe to hear God

call it. That very experience Jesus received, we are invited to receive by grace.

Did you ever notice how, at a baptism, the pastor asks the parents and family of the “What name is to be given this child?” The question is asked *NOT* because ministers can be forgetful. The question is asked to say the name out loud, in the presence of God’s people, to distinguish this one coming to baptism as having a name before God and all the rest of us. A given name and a family name to be sure. AND a name under God, a name in God’s family – beloved.

I had a moving talk with the man who was the leader of my youth group from teen age years at St. James Methodist Church in Olney. As much as anyone, this man is responsible making God and Jesus real in my life. I knew he was born just after WWII in a Russian concentration camp and that he and his family’s life, before coming to America, was horrifying.

He never talked about it much. He’s pushing 70 now and like the rest of us, the older we get, the more reflective we become. In our conversation last week, he told me something that struck me to my deepest soul. Remembering his infancy and starvation, recalling the serious sickness and near blindness that was his life at the beginning, he told me a doctor in the camp said to his mother: “Why don’t you just let him die?”

His mother replied: “Because I named him; because God loves him; because God is going to do something in his, through his, life.”

God did do something with this life, through this life. Me and dozens of other youth: some ministers, some teachers, some doctors, some engineers, some just regular working stiffs, some mothers and fathers who now have children of their own, heard God call their name and came to recognize the Spirit stirring in their baptisms because this youth worker’s mother heard God calling his name.

And so on, and so on, through our lives and baptisms, calling us by name.

I have a pastor friend who has a small fountain in his office. Water runs down the face of a smooth granite slab. He encourages people who come

into his office to place their hands on the slab, let the water stream over their fingers and meditate on the words from a little placard that stands by it. “Remember your baptism and be thankful.”

Until we recognize and remember how we are made, loved, named, claimed by God to be God’s children; until we recognize our very lives as outpourings of Holy Spirit, we have nothing to offer this world any different than it already offers us.

Yet there is so much more.

Thank you, Henry, for the chance to recognize and remember again the epiphany in our baptisms..

■■■ Amen ■■■