



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Called by Name

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Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
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.
For I am the LORD your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
 Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
 and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
 and to the south, 'Do not withhold';
bring my sons from far away
 and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made.'

Scripture is amazing because the words are written by people at a specific time and place in history and yet by the Holy Spirit the words continue to speak to us with an important message here and now. Today we hear from Isaiah the prophet, a passage written in approximately 786 BCE, from a dark time in Israel's history. Let me paint the picture: the people of Israel are in exile; they are living in exile in Babylon as they lost the war and were carried away. Those in power have cast this community aside and spread them apart. People of God are living as strangers in a strange land. They have lost their homeland, are restricted in their freedoms, they can no longer move about as they like or observe their familiar customs, worst of all- they cannot practice their religion. There is not temple for worship. Praying to Yahweh is forbidden. They are cut off. The people cry out to God, when will this end? Are you even listening to us God?

To this despair, God sends a declares a message, God brings a word. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you; When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched." Notice God doesn't say *if* you pass through the fire and the rushing water. But *when* you pass through calamities -- I will be with you. Speaking here, God reminds Israel that God has been with them from the beginning and even named them as a nation. This fact makes all the difference, as it is a guarantee of so much. It reminds Israel's people of their divine origin, of being created and formed by God. Here Yahweh connects with Israel with a

declaration of love and confesses that Israel is “precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.” God will be with them at every twist and turn of the journey.

God, is the great namer, recall in the Garden of Eden when God teams up with Adam to name all the trees and the animals? What a fun day that must have been! The Lord loves in a personal way, no substitution of numbers for names. Giving a name is a big deal, ask any parent. This past week when I was driving in my car, I caught a story on NPR, National Public Radio, about a current service for couples naming their child called **Life Kit**. The service, led by author and baby naming expert Laura Wattenbery has a framework that will help choose a name for your child in a clear and fun way. She explained, “Today there are so many new factors for parents to consider, social media, popularity, broad family connections.” Laura said parents contact her at different times during their pregnancy. Some call right away. Other anxious parents have even called her on the way to the hospital, knowing the deadline for the name is upon them! The name will reflect the identity of that little person forever, the parents want to get it right.

To know someone’s name implies a relationship, a friendship or at least an acquaintance or a relative. It opens the door for acts of care and kindness. When you hear that someone is in trouble, and you know their name, you are inclined to get off the couch and act. Indeed, when we see God call someone by name, take note. This is it is significant- an important message from God. God often

assigned names to people in the scriptures or changes their names to reflect a new direction for them. None was more important than when God gave Jesus his divine name. Life Kit did not exist when Mary found out she was expecting, so an angel came to announce the arrival along with the special name, Jesus. Fast forward when Jesus was thirty, he was given another name by God at his baptism. Here is how Luke tells it.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:15-18)

Jesus was given the name Beloved and recognized as God's Son. As we too follow in the ways of Jesus at our own baptism, we are individually named, blessed, and adopted as a beloved child of God. Jesus was set apart for the mission to begin teaching and preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand. As we share in the baptism of a child or come beside an adult being baptized, we at the church, answer the question that we will commit to teaching and raising the person in the faith. This is our joy to share the good news of God's unconditional love. In the waters of baptism, we discover who we are and whose we are, we belong to God forever and always.

Let me close with a story. Four-year-old Virginia and her family were enjoying a family visit including her grandmother. Gathered around the living room were Mother, Father, Virginia, and Grandmother. Soon it was Virginia's naptime, her parents when up to get her settled for her nap. Grandmother, whose arthritis was bothering her, chose not to go upstairs with the others and remained seated on the sofa. Just as Virginia put her head on the pillow, a storm came up with a flash of lightning followed by a crash of thunder. "I want to go downstairs with Grandmother," cried Virginia. "I'm scared."

The adults in the room tried to reassure her. "Jesus is right here with you," said Mother. "He's even in your closet and under your bed," added Father. Suddenly another blinding flash of lightning and deafening blast of thunder rattled the windows. Virginia, jumped out of bed saying, "You stay up here in my bedroom with Jesus. I'm going downstairs to my grandmother's lap!" And off she ran.

You see, baptism is something like Grandmother's lap. In the midst of rejections, raging storms of life, struggles with covid, when we too feel like exiles baptism reminds us of where love is to be found. Named and claimed as God's child forever, we know that we have been blessed, no matter what. Hear again the promise of the Lord: "I have called you by name and you are mine ... you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you" (vv. 1, 4). And that's the truth.



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