

*“Known and Named, Loved and Claimed”*

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Baptism of Christ Lectionary Year C

Scriptures: Isaiah 43: 1-7, Luke 3: 15-17

My husband Bob and I recently cleaned out our attic, which was a huge task. For years, our whole family had more or less put anything up there that was getting in the way and was no longer regularly in use. Even though cleaning it was kind of an overwhelming job, one aspect of it was really fun—and that was finding a lot of wonderful old works of our kids’ childhood art, long lost photographs, old letters, and the like. One of my favorite finds was a journal I kept when I was expecting my third baby, my daughter Molly. In it was a long list of names we were considering for this baby, in two columns side by side. One column listed all the girls’ names, and the other listed the possible names for a boy.

It reminded me what a momentous thing it is to select a name for another human being! And, of course, even before Molly was born, even before her gender was apparent, we had already named her our beloved child.

Our scripture readings today both show very tender examples of God engaging in acts of naming. How very reassuring and beautiful it is to our sometimes weary and burdened hearts to hear the voice of God as relayed by the prophet Isaiah speaking such words as this:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*When you meet obstacles, they will not overwhelm or consume you, because I will be with you.*

*You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.*

With these intimate, personal words, God names us precious, honored and loved, and claims us as his own. In the Church, one of the most wonderful ways we celebrate this belonging to God is in baptism. Baptism is our “yes” to the loving, liberating claim that God has already made on us in choosing to breath life into us. The baptisms we carry out are modeled after the very baptism of Jesus, an event at which Luke reports that those present experienced a hearing of the Divine voice naming Jesus:

*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* As the family of faith, these loving words of naming and claiming from Isaiah and Luke can live in our collective memory as very important moments in our history as God’s people. These are words to add to our own personal collection of things that have ever been said to us over the years that have brought us joy or peace or comfort. They are the kind of words that can make all the difference, especially in times of pain or crisis. God knows you. God has named you the Beloved One. God loves you. God has claimed you as his own child. It is good

to know that no matter what happens in our lives, we are still our truest selves: beloved children of God. When the once robustly athletic actor Christopher Reeve had been catastrophically injured after falling from his horse, he was tragically paralyzed from the neck down. For a time, he struggled with whether he wanted to live or to die. He wrote in his subsequent book that his wife Dana spoke words at that time that saved his life. She said to him: “You are still you.” In hearing these words, he understood that he had not lost his essential self, and that those who loved him would continue to love him. Those words changed his life and became a reference point and a source of strength for him from then on. In the same way, the words from today’s scriptures are real keepers--words we can go back to when we need them the very most. No matter what happens, we are still God’s precious ones.

It is fitting that on our first Sunday together as pastor and congregation, not only has Luke given us the joy of remembering our baptisms, but we also are blessed to be able to gather together at the family table. Baptism and communion are family events for communities of faith—sacramental times when we recall who we really are and whose we really are. As the treasured children of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, we have already chosen to name each other “pastor” and “congregation.” I am delighted, humbled, and grateful for this naming, and hope and pray that as we come to know one another, we will also grow in our loving and claiming of one another as willing and joyful partners in ministry. Seeking together to be the hands, feet, and heart of Christ in the world, we will be greatly aided in our shared journey by remembering that our first and truest names are embodied in words like “precious” and “beloved” and “honored”, names first whispered to us from the very lips of God.

Amen.