

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
The Rev. Robert M. Alexander
Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
“Called By Name”
Baptism of the Lord
January 10, 2016

When our children were born Jenny and I spent hours going through name possibilities. We made lists and lists for both boys and girls because we wanted the gender of the baby (or babies in the case of Anne and Madalyn) to be a surprise. We considered many family names and we listened to how the first and middle names sounded together. Having musical inclinations, we both wanted the names to have a certain flow to them. We looked through name books to consider the meanings of the names as well. And, of course, looking at our children now I can't imagine them having any other names than the names they have. Although, if I am completely honest I have to admit that I call them the wrong name from time to time. But that happens to every parent, right?

Names are important. Many of our names have stories attached to them. Perhaps yours is a family name like mine. As a child I didn't like my middle name – Meredith. I was named for my grandfather – my mother's father – Albert Meredith Withers. I thought Meredith was a girl's name...and it is...but it turns out it is a boy's name too and as I grew to understand the importance of being connected to my family in this way I became proud of it. I don't know whether you like your name or not but it is yours. It is your name and people know it!

A devotional I read recently reported how at the beginning of the academic year, a school principal had pledged to learn the names of all 600 students in her school. Anyone who doubted her ability or resolve could look at her track record. During the previous year she had learned the names of 700 students, and prior to that, 400 students in a different school. Think of what it must have meant to these children to be recognized and greeted by name.¹

Of course, there certainly were times when some child running down the hall or misbehaving in the lunchroom would just as soon not have been known at all. Our names can be used against us too. There are times when we like to hear our names called and there are times when don't. We don't want to be called out by the teacher, or the principal, or the boss, or the judge, unless it is for something good.

And when someone calls our name we want it to mean more than being some random name on an attendance list like that classis scene from that 80's movie, Ferris Bueller's Day Off. Bueller? Bueller? Bueller? Bueller?

In our Old Testament scripture from Isaiah, the prophet tells the nation of Israel that God knows their name. Although they have been in exile in Babylon and although the Persians under the reign of King Cyrus were breathing down their necks and although the people were feeling forgotten and abandoned by God, Isaiah reminded them that they were loved. God claimed them as God's very own. "You are mine." God says.

Isaiah goes on. When you pass through waters, through river, through fire, I will be with you. I will protect you. Do not fear for I have redeemed you, God says to God's people. You are precious in my sight and I love you! Again God says "Do not fear!" The prophet then seems to expand the circle beyond Israel to say that these words are for "everyone who is called by God's name...all who are created for God's glory...all whom God has formed and made."

The church has borrowed some of this language in its baptismal liturgy. On this Sunday when we remember the Baptism of the Lord we hear once again the familiar words from the heavens, "You are my Beloved Son. With you I am well pleased." We hear these words when we bring our infants and our youth and our adults to the baptismal waters. We remember that when God said, "I have redeemed you" that God would make him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21) We remember the covenant promises of God – who knows our names – calls us by those names through the waters and claims us as God's very own. We remember that God welcomes us into a covenant community where we can learn the ways of Jesus and what it means to be a faithful child of God. We remember the commitments that we make to each other at baptism to journey together in faith and to help one another to be faithful followers of Jesus.

We are named – and our names mean something to us, they mean something to the community, and they mean something to God. They mean we are beloved and that we belong.

Preaching Professor Tom Long tells a story about a creative writer who, back in 1976, America's bicentennial year, came up with an intriguing idea. "Our nation is 200 years old," he thought. "I'll bet I can find someone who is alive today who is old enough that when they were a child, they remember someone who was then old enough to have been alive at the founding of the nation, a living link to the beginning of the country." And, sure enough, he found such a person. He was a Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford, who was over 100 years old in 1976; and he remembered when he was a little boy being taken by a wagon to see his great-great grandmother who was then over 100 herself and who was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first American president.

When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind. She was sitting in an old chair in the corner of a dark bedroom. "We brought Burnham to see you," his father said. The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out with long, bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here."

"They had to push me toward her," Burnham remembered. "I was afraid of her. But when I got close to her, she reached out her hands and began to stroke my face. She felt my eyes and my nose, my mouth and my chin. And all at once, she seemed to be satisfied, and she pulled me close to her and held me tight. 'This boy's a Ledford,' she said, 'I can feel it. I know this boy. He's one of us.'"

Well – the names that we have been given run deeper than family ties, deeper than countries of origin, deeper than flesh and blood. When God whispers our names, God holds each of us close and says, "I know you. You belong to me. Don't be afraid. I KNOW YOU BY NAME."ⁱⁱ

Both Isaiah and Luke remind us that there is a side to this righteous love which can burn. It is fierce and passionate and both the Old and New Testament writers are clear that God's love brings with it judgment. After all, how can this God of radical love see the waywardness of God's people and not call it sin? How can God not be offended and appalled at how we sometimes treat one another and how we sometimes speak to each other? How can the God of all creation not weep over the ways that people abuse one another and God's good creation? But judgment is not the same as condemnation. In Christ we are forgiven and set free to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. For Christ came into the world not to condemn the world but that all might be saved through him.

Joyce Shin, pastor of Swarthmore Presbyterian Church in Swarthmore, PA has written that "God's claim is more radical than any other. To belong to the Creator is more significant than belonging to any other. It carries with it a sense of responsibility for all creation, for all of humanity. As a child of God I am related to and responsible for every child of God."ⁱⁱⁱ Shin goes on to write that Water and the Spirit seal our identities as children of God. And God will not let us go. Ever!

If this is true then when I am called by name and claimed by God, God has certain expectations of me. And even though I may fall short, I am called to conduct myself in a particular way. To love God and neighbor...to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. To not turn my eyes when someone else is in need. To care enough to know the names of others around me and to know the stories and the lives that go with those names. When God calls us by name, it is to a life of service and faithful discipleship – to meet the needs of the world around us and to follow Jesus as the church’s mission is accomplished – a mission that proclaims release to the captive, freedom for the oppressed, hope for the hopeless, community for the marginalized, and love for the forgotten and lonely.

All of us have been called by name, but today we celebrate the call that several specific people have answered to serve as officers in this church – as Ruling Elders and as Deacons. They come today to be Ordained and Installed to active service in these particular roles because they have heard God’s call to them.

It is a good day to ask, “What is God calling me to do?” When God calls my name and tells me that I am beloved and that I am redeemed and that I am precious in God’s sight, what does God have in mind for my life?” At the end of the worship service you will walk out one of these doors and you may not remember a word I have said, but I hope you will remember the wonder of the idea that you are known by God, called by name and loved. And God has plans for you.

By the way – when we do leave – let’s take time to call one another by name. Let’s take time to learn each other’s names and get to know one another better. That’s why we have those Fellowship Registers. That’s why we encourage folks to where name tags. I confess that I don’t remember everyone’s name but I will do my best and I hope you will join me in my goal to get to know more of you this year as we grow in faith together and respond to God’s call upon our lives.

You know - none of this makes a bit of difference if we don’t believe it. If I don’t believe this good news then I will go right back to living a fearful life, fretting over the worries of the world, the scarcity of resources, and the devastating losses all around. But if we choose to believe that God knows us, calls us by name, and claims us, then we can live in faith, trusting that God is able, believing in God’s abundance, and committing our whole selves to faithful love and service to God.

Friends – we’ve been called by name - claimed by God and set free from fear to lives of faith. The invitation is there for you and for me.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ <http://odb.org/2014/12/04/called-by-name/>

ⁱⁱ http://day1.org/481-called_by_name

ⁱⁱⁱ Joyce Shin in *The Christian Century*. January 6, 2016. P. 20.