

“I Have Called You by Name ... You are Mine”

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

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The writer of Isaiah 43 says very clearly right there in verse 1 that God is the one who formed us and created us; and that we shall not fear because God has also redeemed us. “I have called you by name, you are mine.” Is there a clearer passage in all of scripture that declares who you and I are in relation to God? Other places hint at it broadly like in Colossians where it says, “In Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created....and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.” Or, in the Prologue of John (Jn.1:3) “all things came into being through the Word and without the Word not one thing came into being.” And when this Word became flesh, to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. (John 1:12)

That is very clear who we belong to. We belong to God. “I have called you by name ... you are mine.” When does that happen for most of us? When do we feel claimed and called by God?

Today’s Gospel reading, the first lesson, from Luke 3 is about the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus is baptized, says Luke, a dove descends and there is a voice proclaiming Jesus as the beloved Son of God. Right after this event, Jesus begins his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing—a sign that the kingdom of God is breaking out all over. Jesus’ baptism is the day of his “ordination,” the beginning of his work—his ministry.

John the Baptist had been preaching out in the wilderness for some time. He first drew the attention of the local farmers and people from the local villages like Jericho but it wasn’t long before he was drawing crowds from as far away as Jerusalem. He was declaring, “The kingdom of God is at hand, repent of your sins and prepare for the coming the Lord’s holy one.” Some even wondered if John the Baptist was the expected Messiah. But in verse 15 John declares that he is not the Messiah ... “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming,” and then Luke has the people of that particular day line-up. “Now, when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized” ... so you see Jesus got in line with the rest of them.

Presbyterians always try to do things “decently and in order” we say. So we don’t have people line up for baptism, maybe we would if we had thirty or forty people who wanted to be baptized at the same time, I don’t know. But here everyone can pick the Sunday when grandma and grandpa or other family are in Athens. Some churches only do baptisms four or five times a year and they publish the dates and if you as an adult or if you have a baby to be baptized you pick one of those dates and I guess you line up and the minister goes down the line baptizing as many as have presented themselves.

My best image of people lining up to be baptized is in the movie “O Brother Where Art Thou” from 2000, where 3 convicts have escaped from a Mississippi Penile Farm the setting is in the

1930's, it's a comedy (the movie) and George Clooney has the lead role, the escapees are running through the woods trying to get away from the guards and then out there in the woods they come upon a revival. There is a long line of folks dressed in white robes going down to the river to be baptized. And one of the escapees, Wilbur, decides right then and there that he wants to be baptized and get in that line.

Just like Jesus he gets in a baptism line. Jesus is baptized with “all the people”—Jesus presents himself and identifies with all the people in an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners. Jesus simply gets in line with everyone else who has been broken by the “wear and tear” of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. When the line of downtrodden and sin-sick people formed in hopes of new beginnings through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At his baptism, he identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God.

I mention this today on Ordination and Installation Sunday because of the point that baptism is our ordination to ministry within the church. It is not uncommon when the Nominating Committee calls an individual to ask if they will be a nominee for the office of elder for that person to call me and ask, “Dr. Doak or Glenn or pastor, I really don't feel qualified to do this, my life is a mess or has been a mess and I think someone more spiritual, someone more ... well you know what I mean, should serve.” And then I think of the line that Jesus got into, the line that led down to the Jordan River for baptism and I can see the downtrodden and the rejected and the ones who had committed sins they could hardly bare to talk about and then I respond, “You know all of us are unworthy if you try to match elected church office to worthiness. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I sometimes ask them, “Do you have a passion for God and Jesus? Do you want to be part of something greater than yourself? Do you want to answer the call of God in your life right now for actual leadership and service? God has planted the seed in your heart months or years before and now it has grown and matured and the committee is confirming what God has started. None of us are worthy.

It is always that way with God. God calls and we respond. It is never the other way around. We never initiate it is always in response to what God has planted. Like two women telling me when I was ten years old that they were praying that I would be a pastor someday, can you imagine the look I gave them? Try that sometime, tell a ten year old that you are praying for them to be a minister and see how they react? Or, if you really think they are called to be a minister tell them for sure.

Jesus' baptism was the day of his ordination—the day that Jesus' ministry began. He doesn't say a word during the baptism but immediately afterwards Luke says Jesus prays and the Holy Spirit descends upon him. The Holy Spirit will encourage him all the way to the cross.

John the Baptist said, “I baptize you with water but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I and will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” Jesus began his ministry when the Holy Spirit came upon him and he in turn has gifted all of us with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

From these stories and verses I have drawn a few conclusions. First, Ministry is a gift of God. It is not our idea; it is God's idea. Second, Ministry is a gift of God through the descent of the Holy

Spirit. We are given the spirit in baptism, not for some sort of personal comfort (though we may receive comfort from the Holy Spirit), but rather so that we might be empowered to participate fully in the ministry of Christ in the world.

Third, ministry is a gift of God to all the baptized. All of you are ordained by God to be ministers. Pastors are here to help you ministers do your ministry, not to do your ministry for you.

I have seen you in ministry. I have seen evidence that you are ordained—gifted with the Holy Spirit for ministry. I have seen you at ministry in the choir room, or in the Sunday school room as teachers, or the sick room as a Lay Caller or the boardroom out there in business or in the classroom as a student.

The late John Leith, a Presbyterian theologian said, “Every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God.” In baptism the child’s name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was, that God gave to this child an identity, an individuality, a name, and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. In ordination by the voice of the prophet God cries out, “I have called you by name ... you are mine. When you pass through the water, I will be with you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” (Isaiah 43:2)

You can’t wash it away, jump in the shower after your baptism or the bath tub and try to wash the affect away. You can’t give it away, you can’t deny that you were baptized. For God has placed a mark on you and you are God’s, God has called you by name and has declared that you are God’s

This morning we are laying our hands on six new elders and installing four others who have already had hands laid on them. We are confirming today that God has called them to a particular ministry of this church over the next three years to be in leadership. But we are not making them ministers, they already did that in their baptism, we are setting them aside for a particular time and role but they have been doing ministry for a long time.

So, for the rest of us, go on and be a minister! Use the gifts God has given you as a sign of the outbreak of the kingdom of God. Take on new challenges in your ministry, make the challenges big, so that you have to rely on the Holy Spirit to help you. Go on, be the minister that God has called you, ordained you to be.