

Chosen and Beloved

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Isaiah 42:1-9

42:1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

42:2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;

42:3 a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

42:4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

42:5 Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

42:6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

42:7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

42:8 I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

42:9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.

3:14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

3:15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

3:16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Proclamation of the Word

When I married Chuck, I had a huge dilemma. What to do about my name. I wanted to share his name, for sure. I was excited about uniting our lives together, becoming one, but I also had a few hesitations. My name was so very personal. In High School, I was always Laura C. Smith not just Laura Smith. You see, there was another Laura Smith, Laura A. Smith. So my friends even called me Laura C. (which happens to work with Conrad.)

But the other concern I had is that I had always been a Smith. I was taught to be proud of my family name. Like a badge of honor, I treasured my name. Smiths were decent folk who had a reputation in town. Grand Daddy Smith ran the local Oil Mill which supplied everyone with heating oil and ice. Uncle Guy Smith was the local Postmaster. Uncle George ran the Belk Department store, served on the local bank boards, led the Rotary club, where all his younger brothers in town were members. People knew the "Smiths." My father grew up hanging around the County Courthouse after school where his Grandfather, Mr. Les Smith, was the local Magistrate. I had four older brothers, and everyone knew me as their sister, for better or worse :). But even more, my initials were special to me. I am the fourth LCS in my family, a set of initials I shared with my grandfather, father, and brother, all of whom were no longer living. I hated to lose my initials. I know it seems silly perhaps, but I was LCS4. I knew my Dad felt pretty clever coming up with "Laura Catherine Smith" to satisfy the family tradition. To be a Smith was to BELONG- to a tribe of people who loved me and looked out for me. Later I learned more stories of the family name. Things that were not quite as glowing, but as we do in the South, no airing the dirty laundry. I learned stories of brokenness and challenges along with the loyalty and love.

Names are important. They point to our identity. To be a Smith does not carry the weight of a Kennedy or Bush, but there is a power in a name. They define us to some extent. They tell us where we belong. Jesus hears at his Baptism, he is named "Beloved" and "Son." We children of God wear the same family name- **Beloved**. God is the one who gets to define us.

In an time when we like to divide ourselves into categories: Democrat or Republican, Black or White, Clemson or Carolina, American or foreigner, rich or poor, the good news of today's Scripture is a reminder that we are defined first and foremost by God's infinite love and mercy. In a time we commercial labels have power in society- Nike or Carharrrt, Mac or PC, foreign or domestic car, and all the other labels, God defines us. And God calls us Beloved, children of God.

Not to say that all those other names are worthless or insignificant. They are what make us particularly ourselves. And God loves particular. God chose to have Jesus born to particular parents, in a particular time and place, Bethlehem, in order to do a particular ministry. God uses our particular skills, interest, and circumstances to do his will. So those particular names are not without worth, but those names describe us. They do not define us. We are defined by God's mercy and God's choosing. We, those who are baptized into Christ, wear the name *BELOVED*.

You are called by name. And the names we use for one another matter. The names we call others can shape them and their sense of identity. In the movie *Les Miserables* Jean Val Jean has become a prisoner for stealing bread to feed his sister and her child. When he leaves prison after 19 grueling years, he must live as a marked man. He will always be a criminal. He must carry his probation papers with him and present them to any employer. He cannot find work for no one wants to hire a thief. He has become the imprisoned man #24601, his identity as an inmate.

He is a thief until he receives a wake-up call. Desperate, he steals the silver and valuables from a church where he has found rest and a meal. In prison, he is defined by the ones who have held him captive. He has turned into a thief. That is his identity. But given a second chance by the bishop, he is set free. He asks the question "Who am I?" And after dedicating his life to God and finding redemption, he no longer answers by his number, but by his name. He has turned from #24601 into a human being again. He becomes Jean Val Jean again. And he dedicates his life to saving others. Names matter. What we call others matter. You and I are "Beloved," but so are all God's children. When we see others as God sees them, we treat them differently.

God's grace at work in us can help us become who God calls us to be. Our stories may not be that dramatic, but there are times when some of us feel we have lost who ourselves and become something other than God desires.

So on this day, we recall Jesus and his baptism in the river Jordan. Remember your baptism, too. Remember your name, **Beloved, child of God**. As a reminder of Baptism, you have received a river rock or stone. A simple rock is a reminder to you.

When Joshua and the tribes of Israel were on their way to the Promised land, they were almost overwhelmed by the waters of the Jordan. God made a dry path to help them carry the Ark of the Covenant across. Joshua told them to pick up a stone as a memorial. And they used that stone to tell what God had done for them in bringing them safely through. Joshua tells them, "When your children ask you what these stones mean. You tell them what God has done."

As you turn that rock over in your hand remember that God who loves you also calls you to be close to Jesus. Ordained in your baptism you are called to be a disciple. Disciples are students or learners. And we learn by drawing near to Jesus, to really know him as friend -and savior. We first have to know Jesus. We learn at his Baptism that he is the Son of God, THE Beloved.

This week we mark some new ways disciples are committing to grow in faith and service. This afternoon 18 new candidates for ministry begin officer training. In preparation for serving as elders and deacons, they will share their faith stories, learn about the work of the church, and begin each time with worship, focusing on God first.

And we also celebrate that some of our youth start the Confirmation journey this week. Although their retreat had to be cancelled they will begin a process of claiming their own faith. Confirmation is part 2 of Baptism for us. At Baptism, we make promises to share the faith with children until the time when he or she can profess faith for herself or himself.

So please remember these particular groups of folks in prayer as they commit to grow in faith.

Disciples who know they are Beloved also serve as Christ serves. In this season of Epiphany- a time of revelation, we continue the work of Christmas. No one puts it better than Howard Thurman in his wonderful poem "The Work of Christmas":

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

Beloved children of God, let us remember our baptism and in this new year try to grow in our faith and service.

After the anthem you will be invited to remember your baptism together in our response. Let us take that stone with us from worship. You can keep it in your pocket or a place that you will see. Let it be a reminder to you. And when your children or others ask you what it means, tell them what God has done.

Prayer

Holy God, creator of light and herald of goodness,
at the waters of his baptism you proclaimed Jesus your beloved Son.
With the baptized of every time and generation, may we say yes to your call to repentance and be led to the life of abundance we experience in your kinship and your love. Amen.