

Baptism of the Lord

January 13, 2019

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Mine! Mine! Mine!

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. —Isaiah 43:2



Holy One,
untamed
by the names
I give you,
in the silence
name me,
that I may know
who I am,
hear the truth
you have put into me,
trust the love
you have for me,
which you call me
to live out
with my sisters and brothers in
your human family.
—Ted Loder

The second reading today is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 43. The great prophet is speaking to God's people in exile. Forty years earlier they had seen their homes, farms and businesses destroyed, their families torn apart and key members of the community carted off to Babylon. All this happened, according to the prophet, as the natural and logical consequence of their faithlessness -- by refusing to live according to God's law of justice and compassion, for ignoring the situation of the poor, and failing to keep the Sabbath. Now the prophet announces that the penalty is paid and God will bring them home! Listen to the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, beginning at verse 1:

*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 Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored,
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."*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please join me in prayer

You call us by name and claim us as your own. Open our hearts and minds to the power of your word and to the very good news that you love us, in spite of everything. You call us by name, and we belong to you forever in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Fannin County Hospital doesn't have a chaplain; it's too small. Instead, local ministers take turns being chaplain for a day each week. Fred Craddock tells about one of his assigned days when a baby was born. The little one created quite a stir; not a lot of babies were born in a thirty-bed hospital.

Fred wrote, "I went there, about nine in the morning, and saw a clan of people gathered, looking through the glass at a little bitty new baby."

"Is it a boy or girl?"

"It's a girl."

"What's her name?"

"Elizabeth."

"She's beautiful," said the pastor. "Whose is she?"

Everyone pointed at a young man about 19 or 20 years old, wearing bib overalls leaning against the wall. Truth be known, Baby Elizabeth *wasn't* all that attractive at the moment. Squirming in her little bassinet, you could hear her screaming all the way through the glass—squirming, red faced, just bawling.

Thinking the father may be concerned, Fred told him, "Now, you know, of course, she's not sick. It's good for babies to cry; they all do that. It clears out their lungs and gets their voices going."

The young man nodded, "I know. She's not sick. But she's mad as hell." And then he turned bright red said, "Oh, pardon me, Reverend."

Fred shrugged,

"Why's she so mad?"

"Well wouldn't you be mad?" said the young father, "One minute you're with God in heaven and the next minute you're in Georgia."

Fred thought, Man, I've got myself a real mountain Gnostic. This guy's been reading Plato. He said, "You believe your daughter was with God until she was born?"

"Yeah."

"You think she'll remember?"

Long pause.

"Well" ... said the father/philosopher, "I guess that's up to me and her mama and the church. We gotta see that she remembers, 'cause if she forgets, she's a goner."ⁱ

Wisdom. It is the single most urgent issue we are facing – as a community, and as individuals. Like Israel we have largely forgotten that each of us came from God, and, as our creed says, "in life and in death we belong to God."ⁱⁱ If we forget that, we're goners. The hillbilly philosopher was right. We gotta see to it that the little ones who gather down here every Sunday – and all the 7.5 billion people on this planet remember.

That won't be easy.

I am privileged to meet with the parents of this church who are preparing to present their children for baptism. I usually start by commending them for the decision to dedicate their children to God in this way, and the acknowledgment that while the baptismal vows are easy to make, they are very hard to fulfill. But they must try; their church must try. As the hillbilly theologian once said, "It's up to her daddy, her mamma," and perhaps her grandparents, and certainly her church, to make sure that she remembers that she came from God and belongs to God.

At her baptism the preacher will put water on her head from the river Jordan, the river where Jesus was baptized, make the sign of the cross on her forehead, and declare that she is, "Marked as Christ's own forever." She'll be wrapped in a prayer blanket, and walked around the sanctuary where others will lovingly affirm that God has called her by name, that she is God's own.

Her sponsors, her parents, and maybe her grandparents will buy her books about Jesus. They will enroll her in Sunday school where dedicated volunteers will knock themselves out week after week to remind her that she came from God and belongs to God. As she grows older maybe she'll attend Vacation Bible School, go on a youth retreat, or a mission trip.

With every year that passes it will become harder and harder for her to remember, not just because she is moving farther and farther away from her home in God, but because *most* of the people in her life will not be allowed to acknowledge, or will simply choose not to acknowledge that she belongs to God. She'll miss her Christian education classes because of birthday parties, practices, and rehearsals. Scout trips and soccer games will be scheduled at that time. And while it may not be actually true, she will think, as all students do, that every professor believes his or her class is the only class she is taking. Her coaches will require a full commitment from her. After that it will be the job she loves, her dear spouse, her precious children, and her aging parents who will claim her full allegiance. The essential idea that she comes from God, belongs to God, may become no more than a distant memory.

It all reminds me of a scene from Disney/Pixar's animated film *Finding Nemo*. Marlin, the clownfish and Dory, the regal blue tang are out in search of Marlin's son, Nemo. What adventures they have! The two are swallowed by a whale, Jonah-style, later they find themselves stranded on the dock surrounded by crowds of seagulls perched on posts and masts in the harbor. Anyone who has ever tried to eat a sandwich on the beach knows what this is like. The hungry gulls dive bomb the little fish. Watch.

You Tube Video – “Finding Nemo Seagulls (Mine! Mine! Mine!)”

Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine! It's a "hilarious picture of the very unfunny lust to make it all mine." One Biblical interpreter said, “How comforting to know that God has dived into the waters of chaos and the fire of judgement to prove that 'You are mine.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what happened at Jesus' baptism. God looked down on the dusty dry banks of the Jordan and saw John, the Baptizer, John the Prophet, John the Forerunner, baptizing the Son of God in that muddy water. Then as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he was praying, and the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice from heaven said,

You came from God and you belong to God. *“This is my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”*

Just a few weeks ago, 24 pilgrims from Woods stood on that spot. We took a few moments to reaffirm our own baptismal vows and pledged to always remember. It wasn't easy to get there. We arrived early to avoid the crowds only to get stuck at the entrance because – listen to this -- the Israeli soldier with the key to the gate overslept. Six hundred thousand people visit Jesus' baptismal site every year, and the soldier overslept. After waiting a long time we were restless, but signs warned us not to get out of the bus. “The area around the entrance is full of landmines,” our driver warned, live charges remaining from the Six Day War. Jesus came to Jordan in that same kind of chaos and division. He dove into waters no less full of tumult and fire to save us.

Like ours, Jesus' baptism didn't make him more holy. Instead it recognized the holiness already within him. As novelist Marilyn Robinson wrote, “Baptism doesn't enhance sacredness, but acknowledges it, and there is power in that.”^{iv} So much power that the Pharisees asked Jesus on one occasion, “By what authority do you do these things?”^v Clearly his authority was the power of the Holy Spirit, and the memory that he came from God and belonged to God. Do you remember?

“This is my beloved daughter, my precious son. With you I am well pleased.” I can imagine God saying that at your baptism. Before you were old enough to do a thing to earn God's favor, God has named you precious, honored, beloved. Most important of all, God has called you “Mine.”

Live that name. Claim your baptism, and always remember.

One story and I'll close.

The great Gil Bowen, for many years the pastor of the Kenilworth Union Church in Chicago, tells about a man who wrote a letter to his grandson, Karl. It said:

My dear Karl,

Many years ago a young boy lay in a bed much like yours. Before going to sleep some nights when he was plagued with worries, and sleep would not come, he would go to the door of the room where his father lay and call out, "Father, are you there?" and the answer always came back, "Yes, son, I'm here."

I remember that boy went back to his bed and went to sleep in peace.

Tonight, Karl, that boy is older, well into his eighties, and every night before going to sleep he looks up into the face of another Father and says, "Father, are you there?" and the answer always comes back clear – not in a voice he can hear, but in his mind and heart, he hears the answer, "Yes, son, I'm here." And he rolls over and goes to sleep without fear. Karl, I was that boy and I am that man. And I pray for you the same faith.

Love. Granddad^{vi}

Remember Karl. Remember Chuck. Remember Martha. Remember Larry... You came from God, and you belong to God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Fred Craddock and Michael Graves, *Craddock Stories*, Chalice Press, 2001, 126,7 adapted

ⁱⁱ "A Brief Statement of Faith" Presbyterian Church (USA), 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Stan Mast, commentary on Isaiah 43:1-7, <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu>

^{iv} Marilyn Robinson, *Gilead: A Novel*, Picador, 2006, 25

^v Luke 20:2

^{vi} Gilbert W. Bowen, from a sermon, "Whose Are You?"