**BAPTISM: THE SACRAMENT OF BELONGING**

A Sermon by Rev. Cal Chinn
January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7

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.”

IF THERE IS ONE THING THAT WE ALL SHARE IN COMMON, the one experience in which we can truly say that we had NO control over, it is the name that was given to us at birth. You and I know people who hate their given names so much that they will change it legally as soon as they possibly can. That is taking it to the extreme. Most of us who don’t like our given names will simply pick up a nickname or choose to use the middle name or an abbreviation of our given name as our regular name. There is a story behind how we received our names. I was born in the Chinese Hospital in Chinatown; and my English name was given by Dr. Helen Chinn (no relations) who delivered me. Not speaking any English, my parents gave me my Chinese name; and left it to Dr. Chinn to give me my English name. My musician son, Stephen, named his first daughter Ella Rose (after the great jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald and my mother). And he named his son Miles.

Names are important. Names have power beyond the letters that form a particular sound. The expression, “some kids at school called us bad names”, means that certain names are harmful and can hurt. The expression, “a good name”, means more than a name that sounds good; it means that the person who is identified by that name brings qualities of goodness to the name. He or she does the name good! Another expression, “live up to your name”, or “be sure you don’t bring shame to your name”, suggests that a name is much more and much greater than the individual who bears the name. You, as an individual, by virtue of that name given to you at birth, BELONG to a community that shares that same name and you therefore bear a responsibility for the honor or the shame that you can bring to that name, a name that is GREATER than you as an individual. When you apply for a passport, you are asked to provide your GIVEN name; and that means your last name or the name that identifies your family. In my Chinese culture, my given (or last) name is written and spoken first. So, in Chinese, I would be addressed as Chinn Calvin. I am reminded that I belong to a family, a community, that shares that same name and I therefore bear a responsibility for the honor or the shame that I can bring to that name. Being identified by my family name first reminds me that my given name carries a history and is inclusive of both the living and the dead and even those who are not yet born as
well as the history that is yet to be made. The point is that a name is far greater than the individual who bears it, especially when our names are not chosen, but given.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial, was explaining to a TV interviewer why her remarkable work has come to have such a strong grip upon the emotions of the American people. "It’s the names", she said, "the names ARE the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names." Maya Lin is right, and that is why I am saddened that in this digital age, we are as likely to be asked for our numbers as for our names. God does not substitute numbers for names. With great thought and care, God names us too! In today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah, we heard God say to Israel, "I have called you by name, you are mine." Now I want you to ponder all the implications of that declaration in light of what I said in my introduction, about the power and meaning of names and naming. God says to all of us, "I have called you by name, you are mine". God is saying, I NAMED YOU; YOU BELONG TO ME! You may be wondering, well...when did that happen? And how do I know for sure that it HAS happened? Or, what if I didn’t want it to happen? Don’t I have a choice? According to the scriptures, just as we had NO choice at our birth with what our parents would name us, we have NO choice as to God naming and claiming us. BUT, while we may not have a choice about God naming and claiming us... THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF OPTIONS AS TO WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT. We can ignore it. We can deny it. We can take it for granted and just go on living our lives the way we want to. Or we can accept it and do something about it. At the core of who we are, at the core of what is the meaning of life and what is the purpose of life, at the core of our feelings and emotions, at the core of what brings joy and hope, at the core of what is the bottom line for our lives...we all know that God has named and claimed us. My guess is that all of you, sitting here in the sanctuary this morning, fall NOT in the category of NOT KNOWING, but in the category of struggling to decide what you’re going to do about it. Some of you will struggle with it, some will simply ignore it because you’d rather think about what you’re going to have for lunch today, and some will take it for granted and do nothing about it. But there are some of you who will accept it and do something about it: "I have called you by name; you are mine!"

According to the church calendar, the 2nd Sunday of the New Year is traditionally, "The Baptism of the Lord Sunday." Our theme today is BAPTISM. Baptism is about naming and belonging. Baptism is the way you can choose to do something about God’s naming and claiming you. These days, I hear this expression a lot: "I believe in God, so why do I need to be baptized and become a member of the church?" When I was pastor of a Native American congregation in Warm Springs, Oregon, I often met tourists who came to the reservation and would say, "I’m into Native American spirituality". And I would ask them, "Well, which tribe do you belong to?" You see, ALL spirituality must be grounded, shared, and practiced in community. Belief is lived and practiced. And to do that, you have to let go of your individual self and become a part of a community that lives out and practices that belief. But as long as we settle just for "I believe in God and that is all that is necessary", OR my spirituality is personal and I do my own thing," you have NOT let go and given yourself to God’s claim on you. You remain, rather, in full control. When we are given our name, we are set apart, we are distinguished. We receive the grace of individualization; this is NOT to be confused with the sin of individualism. When you are baptized, you submit to the name and claim of God and become a member of the community THAT HOLDS YOU ACCOUNTABLE TO THAT BELIEF AND PRACTICE. This is why I love our Sacrament of Infant Baptism. I’ve counseled parents who refused infant baptism because they wanted their children to reach the age where they could decide for themselves, whether to be baptized or not. I explain to the parents that baptism is not something you earn or deserve. And you don’t need to know enough to want it. Baptism is the fullest expression of grace. That’s how grace works—it is free, unmerited, and unexpected; but then expects a lot from us. We don’t make changes in our lives to get baptized; we make them BECAUSE we have been baptized. Every time we baptize a baby, we are launching that child on this same journey through issues of faith and life. As Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary writes: "We receive the grace of God in baptism, but then we spend the rest of our lives learning how to respond to it. This is why we have the church, which gives us the language of faith, teaches us its great traditions, inspires us with holy missions for our lives and constantly points us back to the gospel for our healing."

In this morning’s lesson, the prophet Isaiah is addressing Israel at the lowest point in its existence, the Babylonian Exile. The future looked dire for Isaiah’s audience. So, the words of the prophet were audacious, making assertions that God is very much alive and well and is dedicated to the restoration of God’s people. The present situation may look like the end of the world, but whether Israel passes through fire or water, God will see its people through. Why is that? Because “I have called you by name, you are mine”. Isaiah’s reference to waters recalls the threat they
faced in crossing the Red Sea and the reference to fire and flame call to mind Israel’s more recent memory of military destruction.

In baptism, those called by God’s naming and claim may now respond with confidence in God’s faithfulness and the power and presence of the Spirit. For me personally, I’m willing to take on challenging leadership responsibilities not because I expect to succeed; I take them on because I know I can handle it if I fail. For at the bottom, I have found the relentless love of God who has been with me and always will be, no matter how deep the waters. Whether it is our failures or illnesses, our economic uncertainty, academic struggles, family tensions or life’s precious moments of joy, God is with us, giving us comfort through it all. This comfort is from a God who calls us by name. Isaiah assures us: “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…when you walk through fire you shall not be burned”. These days, we live in a world where there are many competing claims on us. “If you buy this, drive this, wear this, drink this, eat this, own this, see this, read that, go there, come here, register for this…you will find meaning and purpose and be fulfilled”? Jesus was baptized, God called him by name and claimed him as God’s own. And it is for that same reason that we are baptized—for in baptism, we submit to the fact that God has named us and claimed us, joining us together with all of creation where “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are ONE in Christ Jesus”!