

Read lesson: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

One of the wonderful things about being a grandparent is that you don't get to choose your own nickname. You get your name when it pops out of the mouth of your first grandchild, and it is almost never a perfectly articulated "Grandmother" or "Grandfather."

I am known as Grampa Billy, and Boppa.

Furthermore, I love these names. They are a gift to me and precious no matter how silly they may sound to others. It is my name, given by one who loves me; spoken by one who really doesn't know me very well but loves me nevertheless—not because I've done much or been much to this little one, but simply because I am who I am—and I am loved unconditionally, it seems, no strings attached.

So, you are given a name as a symbol of love, and you not only accept it, you treasure it. Names are important. They tell you who you are and whose you are.

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you:  
I have called you by name, you are mine."

That's the prophet Isaiah, writing a letter 2,600 years ago to a community of people living in exile, miles from their home. They were defeated, their capital city had been burned to the ground and their very existence was in danger. They were no longer sure of who they were as a people.

But now Isaiah says that the Lord's message to them is this:  
"Do not fear . . . ; 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."

Fire and water: they are symbols of everything that threatens, symbols of chaos, destructiveness, even death itself... but, "Do not be afraid, I have called you by name, you are mine."

Names are important. They tell us who we are and whose we are.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, we Presbyterians insist that it be done in the midst of public worship and not privately because it is so central to who we are.

It is a public naming.

“Samuel Marek, or Harper Irene Zieche,” the minister says, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the child’s name is said out loud, and that’s who you are, and then, “Samuel or Harper, you are a child of God; you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” That’s whose you are.

And then we **all** remember who we are and whose as we remember our own baptisms.

When he was about thirty years old, Jesus of Nazareth was baptized. We know virtually nothing about Jesus from infancy until he is thirty other than one isolated incident when he was about twelve and his parents took him to Jerusalem for the Passover.

His story, the story of his ministry, actually begins on the day he walks out of Nazareth, away from his father’s carpenter shop, a few miles out into the countryside to hear a preacher by the name of John, actually a relative of his. John’s oratory is fiery and compelling, like the legendary prophets, Amos or Micah. His message is strong: repent, turn around, devote yourself wholly to God, begin a new life, walk into the river and be baptized, let the waters wash the old away, emerge a new person.

I love to ponder the literary history of stories like this. How did it get into the New Testament? There were no disciples yet to see it and remember it. The only other witness we know who was there was John the Baptist himself, and John will be imprisoned and executed by King Herod in the very near future.

So it’s in there, I conclude, because Jesus remembered and told his disciples about it and the story was passed along until Mark, Matthew, and Luke wrote it down.

It’s in there because it was so important to Jesus himself, the day he was given a name and told to whom he belonged.

It's always difficult to explain our deepest, most profound, most personal religious experience. So I've always imagined Jesus telling it something like this: Someone had asked him how it had all begun. Where did this journey start? And he must have said something like,

“So there I was, standing in the crowd, listening to John, and all of a sudden my whole life passed in front of my eyes, all thirty years of it, and I was filled with a sense of anxiety and anticipation and expectation.

I knew I was at a turning point, when I had to decide what to do with the rest of my life. So for some reason I found myself walking into that river and asking John to baptize me, and he did, pushing me under the water and pulling me back up, and as I stood there a little embarrassed, feeling foolish, soaking wet, water running down my face, tears suddenly came, and it was as if the sky opened and God's Spirit—almost like a dove—came down and I heard a voice addressing me, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’”

It was Jesus' conversion experience, the day he knew who he was, the day he decided what to do next, the day he learned who he was and whose he was: “My Son, my child, the Beloved.”

In his book, *Credo*, a collection of vignettes from the ministry of William Sloane Coffin, there is this:

“What is faith? Faith is being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power but love unending.”

The story of Jesus begins on the day he is grasped by the power of love, the day he knows who he is and whose he is, the day when, in Isaiah's unforgettable image, he knows deeply in his soul that he has nothing to fear, not even death itself, because God has called him by name—“the Beloved Son”—because he belongs to God.

And so Christian faith begins in the human heart when we know that we are loved by God, not, as we consider a list of intellectual propositions, and analyze them objectively, and turn them over in our minds, and measure them against other propositions

(there is a God, there is no God; Jesus was God, Jesus was a good man; love is stronger than hate, hate seems to be winning; there is nothing to fear, there seems to be a lot to fear).

Faith begins **not** when we decide what intellectual propositions are true for us, but when and as we know ourselves gripped by the power of love. Christian faith begins **not** on the day we decide to adopt a new set of rules for living, a new list of sins to avoid, faith begins on the day we know who we are and whose we are: “child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever.”

Author Anne Lamott returned to the Christian faith and the church, a little Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California, after a very difficult and troubled life. She tells the story of her conversion in her wonderful book *Traveling Mercies*. Lamott is an unapologetic Christian, but she has lost neither her irreverence nor her sense of the outrageous, nor her salty language, and she is a bit of an anomaly to both liberals and evangelicals, which makes her compelling to everyone. She was interviewed in an evangelical magazine about her conversion. She said,

“I try to share my resurrection story with people in the hopes that some of them who have left churches or who have been kicked out because of their beliefs or sexual orientation will find something in my words or humor that makes church safe for them again. . . .

I never said I am a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as his name. I say, “Hi, Lord,” and he says, “Hello, Darling.” He loves me so much he keeps a photo of me in his wallet. And, if I were the only person on earth, he still would have died for me.”

That’s what happened to Jesus one day, standing in the water of the river. He knew who he was: child of God, the Beloved, and whose he was forever. And it freed him to love with abandon, to live out his life loving his friends, his people, and all he touched.

That’s why they followed him, I believe.

Nondescript poor people, peasants, fishermen, tax collectors, sinners—people about whom no one ever said a good word. He gave them a new name, a new dignity: child of God, you belong to me forever.

Gripped by the power of God's love, he and they lived and he died and they died without fear.

Do not fear . . .  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

Faith is being grasped by the power of love.  
It is knowing who you are and whose you are.  
It is being freed to love with abandon.

And, it is to be afraid of nothing: not fire, not water, nothing—not even death itself.

At the very darkest and lowest points of his life, and there were many of them, Martin Luther used to write on his slate two Latin words:

*Baptismatus Sum...* I am baptized. I know who I am and whose I am.

It was done for many of us before we were even aware of it: carried to the front of the church, held in our parents' arms, water spilled over our heads. (Names of people in congregation) Dale, Sue, Marty... you are a child of God and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.

And even if you are not baptized, it is for you—it is for everyone—to have, to know, to treasure, and to live.  
To love with abandon and to fear nothing, ever again.

Do not fear . . .  
I have called you by name, you are mine. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.

*Startle us, O God, with your truth. Open our hearts and minds to your word and to the very good news that you love us, and call us by name, and that we belong to you forever in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*