

Subject: Called by Name

Subtopic: Claiming our identity in Christ

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/ayRdZTrWeZk>

On this first Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the “revelation” or “showing forth” of Christ’s light into the world. It is a theme that reoccurs during this entire Church season. Today, that revelation occurred when Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan. It was in this moment “the heaven was opened” and “a voice from heaven was heard.” This voice confirmed that Jesus was God’s beloved Son, and it fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy, ***“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.”***

It was in his baptism that God confers on Jesus the very special distinction of being his own beloved Son in whom He was well pleased. In our own baptism, we too are given a name. In fact, every baptism includes some element of naming and claiming. In our prayer book, the celebrant asks for the name of each candidate, and each are baptized by name. Afterward the celebrant says, *“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ own forever.”* This liturgical dialogue not only implies that God knows us intimately, but we in turn are called to know him personally, as the Spirit within us calls out “Abba, Father.”

I will never forget a priest who, while walking down the aisle, said, “Remember the waters of baptism?” Then he proceeded to splash everyone with water. It was an experience that most people won’t forget. But why should we think about baptism? It’s because, in baptism, we receive ***“the washing of***

rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.¹ Our baptismal liturgy affirms this understanding when the celebrant gives thanks over the water and declares, *“In it, we are buried with Christ in his death. By it, we share in his resurrection. Through it, we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.”*²

Therefore, there are many good reasons to remember baptism and all it represents. It symbolizes more than just an outward washing. It signifies that we belong to Jesus and have become children of God, born of water and the Spirit.

In the musical *Les Misérables*, the author begins with a paroled convict named Jean Valjean, who steals the priest’s silver candelabra. When he’s caught, he expects to be returned to prison to work again in the mines. But the priest surprises everyone when he claims he’d given the silver items to Valjean. After the police leave, he turns to the thief and says, “You belong no longer to evil, but to good.”

In a similar manner, in baptism, we too “no longer belong to evil.” Paul says in his epistle to the Romans, ***“In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God.”***³ We have been forgiven, loved, and set free.

Our identity, our future, and our spiritual security are found in Him. The people Isaiah addressed in our Old Testament lesson today were exiles and oppressed. They had lost everything except what mattered most. They were the beloved of God and called by His name. Their identity stood firm, regardless of their circumstances. Isaiah wrote, ***“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***

¹ Titus 3:5

² BCP, p. 306 The liturgy for “Thanksgiving over the Water”

³ Romans 6:11

*shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.*⁴

This promise meant that God would be with them at every twist and turn of their journey, no matter how difficult it might turn out to be.

This idea of God being with us reminds me of a concept practiced in small villages in Indonesia. Being poor, they knew they needed to depend on each other to survive. Therefore, they willingly offer mutual assistance when someone is in need, such as a roof repair or a home that needs rebuilding. Furthermore, people always go places with someone else. But in a culture like our own that prides itself on expressive individualism and independence, such a concept of sharing and giving doesn't come easily. Most often, it is the Church that teaches us to live together in love for one another. Jesus made it clear that we are not left in the world as orphans. He has promised to come to us.⁵ And with his love poured out into our hearts, we can be there for each other serving as his hands and feet.

The Holy Spirit is our Helper, Comforter, Encourager, and Counselor—a constant companion in a world where loneliness can afflict even connected people.

Therefore as I close today, I am reminded of a poem written by Howard Thurman,⁶ which reflects on what the coming of Christ's light meant to him, and it depicts the essence of the Gospel appointed for today.

When the song of the angels is stilled,

⁴ Isaiah 43:2-3

⁵ John 14:18

⁶ Howard Washing Thurman (November 18, 1899 – April 10, 1981) was an American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader.

*When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the 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 people,
To make music in the heart.*

Peter tells us in the Book of Acts that ***“after the baptism that John preached, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, who then went about doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.”***⁷ God is with us too, and he has promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we may be empowered to serve the world in his name. He has called us, named us, and claimed us as his own, so that we may confidently know that He is with us always even until the end of this age. Amen.

⁷ Acts 10:38