

Remember Your Baptism
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Pound Ridge Community Church
Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2019
Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The young son of a Baptist minister was in church one morning when he saw a baptism by immersion for the very first time. He was fascinated by it, and the very next morning, he decided that the family's three cats needed to be baptized, which he set about to do in the bathtub.

The two young kittens accepted being baptized fairly well, but the old family tomcat was having none of it. The cat struggled with the boy, clawed and tore his skin, and finally got away. With considerable effort the boy caught the old cat again and proceeded with the "ceremony." But the cat acted worse than ever, clawing and spitting, and scratching the boy's face.

Finally, the boy gave up and dropped the cat on the floor. As the cat ran off, the boy called after him in disgust, "Fine, be a Methodist if you want to!"

Now, of course, you can substitute Presbyterian or Lutheran or just about any religion you care to for Methodist, and it's still, I think, a pretty funny story. Yet amid the humor, there is a glimmer of insight. The young boy has intuited something profoundly important: that at its most basic, baptism has to do with establishing identity – with knowing "who we are."

If you were here two weeks ago you may recall that the children and I talked about the only story we have in scripture of Jesus as a young boy. Luke tells how the 12 year-old Jesus and his family were in Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus' parents left for home not realizing that their son was not with them, and when they found him about four days later, he was in the temple, sitting with the elders, studying, discussing and debating.

When Mary and Joseph expressed their upset that he had worried them so, Jesus was surprised by their reaction. "'Why were you searching for me?' he asked. 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'" (Luke 2:49) What I basically said two weeks ago to the kids was that Jesus was making a point about how God wants us to go to church regularly, because we're sure to find Jesus there. But for adults, I think this story has a deeper meaning. Jesus' message was that his parents should have known they'd find him in the temple because his real identity was unalterably bound up in his relationship with his heavenly father. It's the same with us. No matter what messages the world gives us about who and what

we are, our true identities are nothing more or less than who we are as we stand in the presence of God.

And if you boil it all down, that's ultimately what everything we do in here on Sunday is all about. Underneath the hymns, the robes, the symbols, and the sort of specialized vocabulary we have; beneath all the ritual, we are all here seeking an answer to a very simple question, "Who am I, really?" That question is perhaps never more powerfully present than on Sundays like this one when we consider the meaning of baptism. Because at its most basic, that's what baptism is about, too.

Today we read in Luke about the people who were flocking to hear this rather odd character named John the Baptist, who was preaching and baptizing on the banks of the Jordan River. I'm sure many of the people there were just curious, but I would bet that most of them were there because they had questions about their identities, just as we do. What John was trying to do was to put them in touch with the reality of their existence, as we try to do in here. John is administering what he refers to as a baptism of repentance, probably a form of purification ritual that was common among some sects of the Jewish people of that time.

And in the midst of all this, Jesus comes forward to be baptized. It doesn't seem that there was a whole lot of hoopla accompanying Jesus' baptism. Luke says very simply, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." (Luke 3:21)

Now, if Jesus had brought with him any question about "who he was," he didn't wait long for an answer. He got the message in unambiguously clear and spectacular fashion. "Heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove." (Luke 3:21-22) And as Jesus stands in the waters of his baptism, a voice from heaven gives him a new name. He is the beloved Son of God.

To borrow a line from Shakespeare, "what's in a name?" The answer is: everything. A name is individuality, but more importantly, it is identity. Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial, was once 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." And if you've ever visited the Vietnam Memorial, you know she is right.

Names speak about who we are, and where we have come from. Names are our history and heritage, and our calling. At the beginning of every baptism I ask the parents "What name is to be given to this child." It's not because I can't remember from one moment to the next. It's because there is power in the simple act of naming.

I'm always making a big deal about us getting to know each other's names. I'm always hearing people say, "Oh, I'm so bad at remembering names." But that is almost always followed by something like this: "I really wish I could do better at it." You see, I think we all intuitively understand the importance of names, and the need we share to be known by name.

But I think this discussion of Jesus' baptism and the immense importance of his being named the beloved son of God begs one critical question for us. What does any of this have to do with us? The answer is found in today's reading from Isaiah, which sets the context for understanding God's intentions for each of us in the sacrament of Baptism. God said, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1)

There is nothing more important for any of us than to hear God calling our names. The name that Jesus received by right, God invites us to receive by grace. And as in baptism Jesus was set apart by God, so in baptism we are set apart. We are named as someone owned by God, and called to live into that extraordinary reality.

And God goes on in Isaiah to express this promise to those he has claimed as his own: "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...you are precious in my sight" (Is 43:3-4). Notice God doesn't say "if" but "when" – when you pass through the waters, the rivers, the fires, and the flames of life. Tough times are almost inevitable over the course of our lives. Even then, God promises, "You are precious in my sight." That's the promise Jesus hears at his baptism and the promise that we hear again through Jesus at every baptism, the promise that God not only knows us by name, but calls us to wear proudly that God-given baptismal name.

But of course, being human, we won't always live up to the name. There will be times when we have fallen, and times when we feel that we just aren't equal to the task – times when prayer begins to feel like little more than periodically asking to be forgiven for the same things, over and over. Those are not the times to avoid God in our shame, but to remember who we are.

Even the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther was plagued at times by a sense of despair brought about by his feelings of his own unworthiness before God. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have been baptized." Often, he would touch his forehead and say to himself, "Martin, you have been baptized." What he was doing was reminding himself in a physical way that despite his failures, he had been cleansed and forgiven, claimed and sealed by God's own Spirit and given my new, everlasting identity in Christ.

Today our beautiful baptismal font is front and center in our sanctuary, a spot that is more in keeping with its significance in the life of faith. It should be here always, but the space doesn't permit it. Since it is here, I would like to give you an invitation to stop there briefly on your way out of church, or come back later. Touch the water, let it flow through your fingers, and, if you are so inclined, touch your own forehead with it. As you do that, let the water remind you of who you are. God has called you by name. You are God's beloved child, and a cherished member of God's family.

Remember your baptism – and be thankful.