

“I Have Called You By Name”

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on January 9, 2022
based on Isaiah 43:1-7*

I want to begin with a first-person account by a woman who likes to tell this story but wants to remain anonymous. These are her words ...

I’VE ALWAYS KNOWN *I was adopted. From the time I could first understand, my adoptive parents told me that I was special and that they didn’t have to take me, but chose me. For composition assignments in high school and college, I argued in favor of closed adoptions, and, up until two months ago, my interest in my biological family was a mild curiosity at best. Then I read a novel written by a birth mother that depicted the other side of adoption, and all at once I had to know where I’d come from and who my birth mother was.*

Court order in hand, I made the four-hour trip to the courthouse in the county where my adoption had taken place. I waited anxiously as the clerk found the file. Then, as she unsealed it, I eagerly anticipated reading my birth mother’s name for the first time. Instead of her name, however, the first thing my eyes lit upon was my name — the one my birth mother had given me. Before that moment, I’d never even considered the existence of this name. Suddenly, I felt as if my current identity were somehow false. At the very least, here was proof (not that I’d ever doubted it) that I had another family out there.

I have since found my birth mother. But it was my first glimpse of that other name that truly turned me around: for a week after seeing the court files, I’d look into the mirror and think, “Heidi” and wonder what life I’d be leading now had that remained my name.

“What’s in a name?” How has your name influenced who you are?” Did you once have a different name? Could you have had different name?” What difference would it have made?”

We get different names as we go along in life. Some get “Doctor” and then decide whether they want to use it or not. Some get “Reverend,” which I find so awkward, at best.

In an article by a Princeton professor who was quite swept off his feet by the birth of his child's first daughter the fellow wrote, "Simply by being born she caused me to be called something no one ever called me before; namely, 'grand.'" He got a new name: Grandfather.

Most little ones can't pronounce grandmother or grandfather. If you're lucky you get something like Nana or Pop Pop, but it can get a lot worse.

Nora Burch calls herself a "name nerd" and has done extensive research on grandparental names. Her own mother insisted on "Moogie." Her research uncovered Zsa Zsa, Pitti Pat, Muna, Minnow, Muffer, FaFe, LaLa, Cappie, Gankie, Dappy, Boo-Boo, Bubba, Koko, and Dodo.

The truth about this topic is that most grandparents don't get to choose their name. Your special name amounts to the first thing that comes out of your first grandchild's mouth. You may be embarrassed to repeat it in public, but you love it. It is a gift given by one who barely knows you but loves you unconditionally. Your name is precious because of who gave it to you.

Your name tells you who you are, and, if you're really tuned in, your name reminds you of "whose" you are. Baptism is not the official naming of a child: that's between parents and the state. But we do make a point of asking "What is the Christian name of this child?" and then saying the name and then the promise "You belong to Jesus Christ forever."

Today's Hebrew Testament text speaks of a people who had become convinced that they didn't belong to anyone, that God had forgotten them (if indeed there was a God), a people who had seen their beloved city burned to the ground, including God's dwelling place, the temple; a people who were driven through the burning embers of their homes, across the desert into captivity in a foreign land.

To them a prophet/poet named Isaiah wrote a letter of comfort:

Now thus says the Lord: 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. . . . You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1-2, 4)

A powerful movie from a dozen years ago uses the name *Precious* to tell a story of redemption. It is a difficult picture. The director, Lee Daniels, wondered whether America was ready for it.

Precious is a sixteen-year-old, African American young woman: obese, illiterate, raped and impregnated by her father, and abused, physically, sexually, and mentally, by her mother. In her fantasy world, she resists her oppression and abuse, imagining herself the star of a twisted video, seeing in the mirror of her imagination a slender, white, blond girl everyone likes.

When she is impregnated a second time and suspended from school, the principal steers her toward a special school, where she meets sensitive teachers and a social worker. There she begins to learn to read, and amazingly to value herself enough to fight back against her oppression. The *New York Times*' Lynne Hirschberg, who reviewed the movie said, "Precious is a stand-in for anyone—black, white, male, female—who has ever been devalued or underestimated."

In this morning's Hebrew text the prophet Isaiah hears God say, "I have called you by name; you are precious to me." Those are life-giving words, life-changing words. Everyone should hear those words sometime or another.

Five-and-one-half centuries after Isaiah wrote those words to the Hebrew exiles in Babylon, a descendant of those people, Jesus of Nazareth, thirty years old, was standing on the bank of a river listening to John the Baptist preaching.

Now, we don't know a thing about the years between Jesus' birth and that day, other than an occasion when he was twelve and his parents took him to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

We're told nothing about his adolescence and young adulthood. We assume that his family were observant Jews and regularly attended the synagogue in Nazareth where he sat with his father and other men of Nazareth to listen to and memorize the Hebrew scriptures and to pray.

We assume that his family celebrated the annual Jewish holidays: Passover and the rest.

We assume that his father died and that Jesus continued to live with his mother and brothers and sisters, working as a day laborer like his father probably did, working with his hands on building projects.

Some suggest that he walked several miles every day to the new Roman city of Sepphoris, which was under construction at the time; finding employment there building houses, temples, maybe the amphitheater, the city wall, the aqueduct.

But the fact is we don't know a thing until the day when he is thirty and journeys south to the river where John the Baptist is preaching, urging people to repent, to turn around and live new lives devoted to God, and, as a sign of their decision, to walk into the river and allow John to plunge them into the water in a symbolic act as old as their own ancient religion: to be washed clean, to be submerged, imitating drowning, and to rise to new life.

We don't know what Jesus was thinking. We can assume, being nearly thirty that like many young adults he might have had a kind of vocational and identity crisis; that he began to think about who he was in earnest, asking himself what he might have been born for beyond making a living.

Sometimes thirty-year-olds decide to walk away from whatever they are doing and go back to school -- they go to law school, trade school, med school, seminary, begin graduate study.

We don't know what Jesus was thinking, but for some reason he decided to walk into the water and at that moment everything changed for him, crowned by a moment of confirmation which is characterized by the gospel writer as a voice coming from above: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Parker Palmer is an educator, theologian, writer, and an expert in higher education. In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, he describes struggling with depression and, in the midst of his therapy, he says he remembered the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's famous line, "love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other."

Palmer wrote, "Amazingly, I was offered an unmediated sign of that love when in the middle of one sleepless night during my depression I heard a voice say, simply

and clearly, 'I love you, Parker.' The words did not come from without, but silently, from within. . . . It was a moment of inexplicable grace" (pp. 64–65).

Once again, hear this morning's text ...

Now thus says the Lord: 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. . . . You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. (Isaiah 43:1–2, 4)

Allow me to share a story I have shared with many of you in an email blast but not in-person ... the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story about another baptism.

Many years ago now, I and about three hundred other people attended a baptism at which Desmond Tutu, the [late] archbishop of Capetown, presided. It was an impromptu thing, arranged at the last minute during a conference we were all attending in the mountains of North Carolina. Tutu had completely wooed us by then—first, by showing up in an orange dashiki, baggy shorts, and plastic flip flops; and second, by giggling a lot—this Nobel Peace Prize winner had come through hell on earth in South Africa with his ability to laugh intact.

The way I remember it, someone in the audience knew a family who had just welcomed a baby with Down syndrome into the world. They wanted their baby baptized, but they didn't belong to a church. So this person in the audience ... asked Archbishop Tutu if he would do it and he said yes, on the condition that all of us who were there could serve as witnesses. That way, when it came time to ask the question about whether everyone present would support this child in his new life in Christ, the baby and his family would hear more than three hundred people shout, "We will!"

So that's how it happened. On Sunday we gathered in the auditorium for the service. There was a makeshift baptismal font set up on the stage, with a pitcher of water on a table beside it. The place looked as nice as the auditorium at a camp conference center can look, which isn't saying much— but it didn't matter, since the Archbishop only had eyes for that baby.

Before he invited the family to come forward, he poured the water into the font. Then he prayed over it in his native language ... which has lots of tongue clicks in it.

Next, he did something I have never seen anyone else do before or since. He leaned over the water and blew on it—once this way, and once that way—like he had all the time in the world. He breathed the sign of the cross on the water, and then he invited the family to walk through the sea on dry ground with their baby in their arms.

It was the evidence of things not seen. It was a moment full of the peace that passes all understanding.

Did the family come through the waters to the other side with their wounds intact? Of course they did, but in the midst of much rejoicing, too.

Finally, let me share this with those of you who find yourself on the other side of your career or maybe careers – find yourself in the uncertain land of retirement ...

Sister Joan Chittister, in her book, *The Gift of Years*, observes that we live in a society “in which people routinely ask what we do immediately after they ask our name,” that our identity is tied to and dependent on what we do for a living. And so unemployment, for whatever cause, is not just a financial crisis but an emotional, identity crisis as well. Who are you when you are not doing what you used to do?

She writes, “I find myself stripped of all the accessories of life. I am face-to-face with my self. And the fear is that there isn’t [a self]. I have spent my life being somebody important, and now there is nothing left but me. I no longer run anything. I’m not becoming anything. I’m just me.”

And it is precisely at that moment, which comes to us all, in one way or another, sooner or later, that we need a life-giving word: “You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

So hear that word this morning, whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey; whatever is happening or not happening in your life—facing surgery, grieving a loss, worried about your job, quietly frustrated and frightened because you can’t find the kind of work that fulfills you, retired maybe, but not sure that’s the best place or you either, bumping along, wondering if you are doing the right thing, wondering who you really are.

Hear a word from God, a true word, a life-giving word:

Fear not. . . . I have called you by name. You are mine. You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.

Amen