

The Baptism of Christ: I Got a Name

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Mark 1:4-11

The wonderful old preacher, Halford Luccock, had a story for just about any occasion, including one for a day like this when we reflect on baptism. He told of an old slave woman from Georgia who watched General Sherman's army go by on its march to the sea. She had never been away from her plantation; had never seen that many people in all her life. As the long procession of troops neared its end, she said, "So many of 'em. I reckon they haven't all got names." Well, her simple observation was really quite profound. It is easy to get lost in a crowd, to slip through the cracks in a busy time, to feel misplaced amid the machinery of the modern world. In a digital age, how often are you asked your number before you are asked your name? It is a profoundly human question to ask, "What is my name? Just who am I, really?"

A few years ago, Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., was asked by a TV interviewer why it was that her remarkable work seemed to have such a strong grip, such a deep emotional impact, on people. She replied, "It's the names. The names are the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names."

And so here's Jesus, standing in the muddy water of the Jordan River. Certainly it is a humble act, an act of self-identification with his people. But I think it is also so much more. Because as he stands there, it seems that even Jesus has to ask, "What is my name? Who am I really?" And what does he hear? He hears God call his name. Says Peter Storey of Duke Divinity School, for Jesus, there in the water, "Suddenly, all those first inklings of vocation that stirred in childhood, the un-shaped consciousness of call, the inner yearnings and searchings are brought into sharp focus. God names him: 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.' This affirmation is the defining moment for Jesus." He has a name; he is somebody; he is God's beloved; and God has called him into God's new creation. Do you suppose the same thing could be said about us?

Those of you who have been baptized, do you recall anything at all about your baptism? I have always found it fascinating to listen to people describe their baptism, even if they were baptized as infants – where was it, who was there, was it in a church, who was the minister?

United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon, says this about his baptism: "After a large Sunday dinner, family and friends gathered in the living room of my grandmother's rambling house for the event that made me a Christian. Lifting a silver bowl filled with water, the preacher said some ritual words, made some promises and baptized me.

"There is much about my baptism I would have done differently. Baptism properly belongs in a church, not a living room. Yet God manages to work wonders despite our ineptitude. And becoming Christian is something done to us and for us before it is anything done by us. As an infant, I was a passive recipient. Someone had to hold me, administer the water, tell the story of what Jesus had done and the promise of what he would do. Somebody had to model, for me, the life of faith. It was all gift, all grace...I am the product of a human family with all the goodness and badness of most any family...yet, as my baptism signified, I was also a gift of God. Heaven was mixed up in who I was and was to become."

He concludes, "From the day of my baptism, in ways that I'm still discovering, it has been impossible fully to explain me without reference to the water, the promises, the story, the hands laid upon my head. Whatever criticism anyone may raise about the way I was baptized, that baptism worked."

How about you? Did your baptism work? Has heaven been mixed up in who you were, who you are, who you are to become? You know, I'm not sure I can ever preach about baptism without returning to Mac, the hard-living character played by Robert Duvall in the film, 'Tender Mercies'. You might recall it. Mac is a down-on-his-luck country songwriter who battles the bottle. He fights back with the help of a young widow who offers him room and board in her roadside Texas motel in exchange for some handyman help. Somehow, a measure of grace gets a toehold in Mac's life, and eventually he and the widow's young son, Sonny, make the decision to be baptized. The day comes, they go to church, they're baptized. And driving home after the baptism, Sonny says, "Well, we done

it, Mac, we was baptized.” Then, peering into the truck’s rearview mirror, Sonny studies himself for a moment. “Everybody said I’d feel like a changed person. Do you feel like a changed person?” Mac smiles and answers, “Not yet.” “You don’t look any different, Mac. You think I look any different?” “Not yet,” Mac answers once again.

Did your baptism work? Do you feel like changed people? Like Sonny, we don’t always see ourselves as changed people. There’s a lot of “not yet” still in our lives. Unlike Jesus, we don’t often see the heavens open and hear the voice of God. And yet, again, could it be that what was said to Jesus is in fact said to each and every one of us? Could it be that we have a name, a call, a significance that we haven’t even begun to wrap our brains around?

That can be hard to believe at times. I mean, I get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and too often what I see is that same old face staring back at me; that same face with its same failures, shortcomings, memories of all the times I have disappointed myself and others, all the times I have failed to be the person God calls me to be. And more often than not the world outside my mirror isn’t particularly helpful either. As one preacher has said, the world has a way of “wringing us out.” You’re called names in school, you get a poor score on a test, things go badly at work, the coveted promotion never comes, you have a bitter argument with a loved one. We get “wrung out.”

No one knows this better than Charlie Brown, right? He’s talking with Linus, and he says, “I wonder why it happens? Just when you think everything is perfect, life deals you a blow!” “I know what you mean,” Linus answers. “Maybe we should all wear batting helmets.” Ever feel that way? Ever feel like maybe you should go out with some kind of a batting helmet, maybe some kind of an armored shield between you and the world? The world can wring us out. The preacher talks about baptism and being a changed person, and Heaven knows I’m struggling enough just to be the person I am right now.

But my mind goes to a comment attributed to Martin Luther. He said that when life just seemed too hard for him, in those times when nothing in life seemed to be going right and everything and everyone was against him – and he certainly had more than his share of such times – he would look into that mirror, see the same old face, and say to himself, “You are baptized. Never forget, you are baptized.” And that was enough to see him through.

You are baptized. You have been named and somebody’s calling your name. Each of you, in your own unique, personal, even weird and strange way, each of you is a beloved child of God, an heir to God’s promise of unconditional love and grace. Remember that watermark. When you look at that same old face in the mirror look for the watermark, the reminder that you are a beloved child of God with whom God is well pleased. Dare to say yes to the gift of life, dare to take your place in God’s human family, dare to step out and make a difference for the Kingdom of God. For the “not yet” of baptism actually can be good news: you haven’t yet arrived, there are still so many unexplored possibilities for each of you.

There is a church denominational office that features a fountain where water runs down the smooth granite slab. Visitors are invited to place their hands on the slab, let the water stream over their hands as they meditate on the words carved into the slab, “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” That’s not a bad six word summary of this morning’s sermon. As our prayer concerns reveal, we come here each week with so much on our hearts: there is one whose life has been knocked off its foundation by the death of a loved one, one whose life has been wrenched by divorce, one for whom personal failure seems like the end of the world. We come here vulnerable, hurting, hoping, dreaming, crying, and rejoicing. Which is to say, so many of us come here in a state of “not yet.” And I am aware that I am usually woefully short of ready solutions and happy answers. But what I can say, much like the words on that fountain, is this: remember your baptism, remember that God knows your name; remember that you have a place in this unfolding human drama and always, God’s creative spirit is at work – claiming us, birthing us, renewing us.

I don’t know--are you all finished? Have you done all you can do, have you pretty much decided that nothing’s new under the sun? Well, hang around just a little longer, because if I’m not mistaken I think I just heard God say...”not yet!”