

“Redeem Our Fear”

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Jan. 13, 2019 -- Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. {2} 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. {3} For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. {4} Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. {5} Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; {6} I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth-- {7} everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Luke 3:15-17

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, {16} John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. {17} His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Luke 3:21-22

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, {22} and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We all want to be accepted for who we are, where we are. We want to know that we are important to others and that we are valuable -- as friends, or family or at work or school and maybe especially in the church and whatever other capacity might come along.

We know what it feels like to want to be a part of the group. To belong to something beyond ourselves. To be selected for the job. To have people say good things about you. To be chosen to sing the song, or read the part, or light the candles. It feels like acceptance.

Today is “Baptism of the Lord” Sunday and our scripture readings lead us in a direction that would help us think about how God claims us and calls us and accepts us as God’s own people.

In our Christian education program the church recognizes and reaffirms the importance and value of our Baptismal vows. In our tradition Baptism is the way that God makes it known that yes, indeed, we are accepted, we are chosen, we are set apart and special and claimed by God. Even before we do anything of any significance other than exist.

Of course the story of Jesus Baptism and God’s declaration from on high is the ultimate example of claim, of setting apart to be or do something. When God declares, ‘this is my beloved son,’ we know that this is one of great importance.

More than anything else in this life we want to be wanted, to be chosen by someone else as important. Children thrive on their parents attention and claim upon them. Playmates and friends are vital to us as we develop. As adolescence comes, that first boy or girl that shows interest in us as a person is vital to our development and maturity. How we are accepted by our peer group makes or breaks us in our teen years—and when we find ourselves attracted to

one person whom we would choose and that choosing is mutual, then the feeling of being wanted is very fulfilling for us. Being 'it' with someone is vital to our emotional well being.

When we read those words of claim and promise in Isaiah, we can see that what God wants for Israel, that has been estranged from God in exile, to know, is that God never stopped loving her, that now Israel has no need to fear, for Israel is to be redeemed—to be called by name. God is inviting them to come home. He tells them, meaning it quite literally, "O Israel: 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; 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."

How important that is to us—to be known and called by name. When you see the old school teacher and she knows your name, or the person you would like to know cares enough to find out who you are, it makes us feel claimed and vital and wanted. We ask folks to wear name tags on Sunday morning so that we can be sure to call each other by name. Or so your pastor can glance down and remember.

When I was introduced to a couple visiting our congregation, I decided to remember their names by noting they were the same as those of two characters in a very old children's story. I'd had in elementary school.

After the services I stopped to talk to them, and as they were saying goodbye I teased, "Be careful going up that hill! But you must get that all the time." They smiled politely but said nothing. After they left, the church member who introduced us said, "What was that all about?" "Jack and Jill. Up the hill. Remember?" I said. "Yes, but what does that have to do with," he pointed to the

couple, "Dick and Jane?"

We human beings are afraid of a lot of things. Not just forgetting names. In the top ten things that we're afraid of are some things you would suspect. Spiders, snakes, heights, flying, fear of tight spaces, fear of thunder and lightning. Believe it or not the number one thing people admit to being frightening is speaking in public. When I was in seminary a large part of the first course on preaching had nothing to do with theology, or content, or delivery, it was all about squelching the fear of getting in front of people. It isn't often thought of spontaneously, but when asked specifically, people responded to the question, are you afraid of not belonging to something or someone. The almost unanimous response is yes. We want to belong. We want to know we matter.

God want us to know we matter as well. God, as God did for Israel, claims us as God's own people. God wants us to know that because of God's own choosing we have no need to fear because God has redeemed us—God knows us by name. No matter what situation in which we find ourselves – no matter if things are going well or we face the firestorms of life around us, we have no need to fear. God is with us. God knows us by name. The redemption of our fear comes in the personal and caring way God speaks to us. Calls us by name.

When Jesus is baptized, this young man from Nazareth, the son of a carpenter, who has already been recognized by John, a real character of the day, a prophet making the way straight for the Messiah, is further claimed by God as God's beloved son—and as one whom people are to listen.

Here, baptism from John, and God's claim go hand in hand. In fact what has happened is that John has baptized Jesus and then God has appointed Jesus for the tasks that are ahead of him.

The first time God laid claim on us was at our birth and that was made real for us in our baptism. Never more so than on Sundays do we see evidence of the power of baptism formula recited over and over. Parents are asked for a name: and are all called by name. All identified as being chosen and accepted and redeemed by God.

We are all called and claimed by God, to live for and serve God in the world. Each one of us has a special task to perform. God has a plan and purpose for each of us that begins in our baptism.

God's promise for us is echoed again in Isaiah 43 as we are called to serve without fear for God is with us, God has redeemed us, God calls us today by name.

To be chosen—to be claimed—to be redeemed is vital to our living. God has done so for all of us in Christ. The message from God is do not be afraid—for I am with you—I have claimed you and called you by name. We belong. We are loved. We are God's own.