

“Claimed and Named”

Matthew 3:13-17

Anne M. Cameron

Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church

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Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him. And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

Names are important. Our identity is wrapped up in our names, for better or for worse. When we come into a new situation, we understand how important it is to learn someone's name. Until we know each others' names, it is impossible to have a relationship. Until I learn your name, I cannot really know you. A name is only the first step, but it is a critical one.

We all know of the power of names, and we remember the power of giving new names in the Bible. Abram becomes Abraham ("father of many") and Sarai becomes Sarah ("one with power"). Jacob ("the striver"), after wrestling with God, becomes Israel ("he who contends with God"). In the New Testament, in a dramatic moment, Saul becomes Paul. With a new name there is a new beginning: a change. Maybe even a new life.

On Wednesday I learned that I had been given a new name. When I walked into the fitness center that morning, I was greeted with "Good morning, Cameron". I was confused, so I asked the clerk what name showed up on the computer. "Cameron Holden", she said, with certainty. "Oh, no, that's not my name". (I know, this is the payback I get for not changing my name when I got married.)

But all kidding aside, I actually *have* received a new name and a new identity when I came to Lake Highlands. That new name is "Pastor". It is different than "Associate Pastor" (or, as one of my former congregants used to call me, the "pastor's assistant"). It is different: It calls me to give in ways that are larger than before.

At his Baptism, Jesus is given two names. Both are important to understanding who Jesus is. He is called "Son of God" for the first time in Matthew's gospel. This title, "Son of God" means at least two different things.

One is a reference to the **suffering servant** in the book of Isaiah. The other refers to Jesus as **Messiah, the king**.

The suffering servant is the one we heard about in Isaiah 42:1 "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one *in whom* My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations". The servant is faithful and obedient. As we all know, this obedience will take Jesus to the cross.

When Jesus is called "My Son" we also hear echoes of kingship and images of King David. Jesus is the Davidic Messiah¹.

So we are told in just a very few words that Jesus is the Messiah King *and* the servant who will suffer.

Jesus is given one other name at his Baptism, besides Son of God. This is a much more personal name, Beloved. This word is only used seven times in all gospels: at Jesus' Baptism (in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), in two accounts of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain, and in the parable of the landowner who sends his *beloved son* to check on his vineyard.

Beloved. A beautiful name that rings with a unique, almost intimate, tone. It is impossible to hold God at a distance when God uses such language. Beloved. Jesus is named and known by God. Jesus is beloved.

Who are God's beloved? Jesus is---for sure---but we are told something else, something incredible---we are God's children, too. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, when he says, "those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God . . . you received the Spirit of adoption. And by the Spirit we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." (Romans 8:14-16)

We have been adopted by God. We are beloved. To be beloved starts first with God. We don't work our way into it, somehow earning 'beloved' status, then we are given the name, like some award! No, the belovedness comes first and we respond out of the circle of that love. When children are beloved, and they know it, they *want* to respond. They want to be obedient (well, maybe not all the time!). They want, above all, to keep the connection, even when it hurts. Beyond obligation, beyond rules. When a spouse is beloved, and knows it, they want to be faithful and giving. There's nowhere they wouldn't go to care for and please their loved one.

About ten years ago there was a movie out starring Robin Williams. This wasn't a comedy. Turns out, it didn't do too well at the box office. It wasn't very

¹ From Psalm 2: "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou *art* my Son; this day have I begotten thee".

popular, but it was powerful. It was a movie about the afterlife². And it was a movie about beloved-ness.

The plot is this. Robin Williams, as the husband Chris, dies in a car wreck. He spends his time wandering around the afterlife, worrying about his wife, Annie. Annie isn't doing very well back on earth. She's lost both her children and now her husband in terrible car accidents. She kills herself and ends up in Hell, which is where Chris finds her. Only there's a catch. If he goes there to be with her, he has to stay in Hell. And even worse, she won't even know who he is. The love Chris has for his beloved is so strong, he's willing to lose his mind, and spend all eternity in Hell with her, because she is his beloved³.

This kind of outrageous beloved-ness is at the heart of our relationship with God. God has already given us God's Beloved son, no strings attached. This Beloved Gift claims us. This claim gives everything. And this claim will ask everything of us.

This is the claim we recognize in Baptism. Baptism means many things⁴.

In baptism we are forgiven, cleansed, made new, changed. We are given a new identity. We die and we are raised from the dead. You may not realize it because we Presbyterians rarely baptize by immersion (even though it is allowed!)⁵, but this is why many Christians go under water when they are baptized. It is a symbol of dying to the old life and rising with the new. It is a dramatic sign of being raised with Christ. Preacher Fred Craddock recalls this about his own baptism:

“When you're raised from the dead, you're different. When you're raised from the dead, you don't look the same, you don't act the same, and you don't sound the same. That's what was puzzling to me when I was baptized just a couple of weeks short of my fourteenth birthday. This passage. . . was used by the minister who baptized me: “. . . you have died and now you have been raised with Christ. Set your mind on things that are above.” As I walked home with my wet clothes wrapped in a wet towel under my arm, I tried to think what that meant. You know, after you've been raised from the dead, you don't look the same, sound the same, talk the same, do the same. *But what do you do? How do you talk? What do you sound like?*”

²Some may (realistically) argue this movie has little to do with what we believe about heaven, though the scriptures are decidedly vague and unclear about the exact nature of the afterlife.

⁴ Our Book of Worship says “in Baptism a person is sealed by the Holy Spirit, given identity as a member of the church, welcomed to the Lord's Table, and set apart for a life of Christian service” (W.4.2001)

⁵ Our Book of Order actually mentions immersion as one of the appropriate forms of Baptism.

“I went to school Monday morning thinking, *“Is anybody going to know that I’ve been raised? Should I dress up a little better from what I’ve been dressing? It wouldn’t hurt. Do I talk another way? Do I throw in a verse of scripture now and then? What do I do at ball practice? Are they going to say, “Well, he looks like he’s been raised from the dead”.* How do you talk? How do you walk? How do you relate?”⁶

When you’re raised from the dead, you’re given a new name.

To be named is to be known by God. This is a terrible thing. A terrible thing that is at the same time terribly frightening *and* terribly reassuring.

The frightening part? We are baptized into death. Ancient baptismal fonts were deep and wide. Many were formed in the shape of the cross. You would walk down into the water, then rise up on the other side. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls someone, he bids that one come and die.” In our funeral rites, we say, “If we have been baptized into a death like his, we will surely be resurrected into a life like His”. It is frightening, because to be named and claimed by God will demand our all, even our very life.

The reassuring part? To be claimed means God will never let us go (no matter what). To be named means God knows us personally, intimately. In our Reformed tradition, it is God who comes first. God who is sovereign. God who chooses us, who names us. Baptism is God’s initiative (which is one reason we baptize babies---to underline the fact that God chooses us *even before* we are able to respond). It is not dependent on our response, though response is certainly called for. It is not up to us. And also, there’s this. We are not a nameless, faceless mass of humanity, but each one called, named, named before we even existed, before we were knit together in our mother’s womb.

We, you and I, alongside Jesus, are God’s Beloved. And because we are, we want to respond. We want to be obedient. We want, above all, to keep the connection, even when it hurts. We want to know how to walk, how to talk, how to relate. When we grow into our Beloved-ness, by the grace of God, we will be faithful and giving. We get a new name. And that name is Beloved. Thanks be to God!

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories, pp. 92-93.