

Before we jump right in to today's passages, first a little context. The Israelites were some 500 miles away from their home-Jerusalem-captured by the Babylonians as slaves. Jerusalem had been destroyed-homes, businesses, the Temple. Some younger generations of the Jews knew nothing but living under captivity in Babylon. The prophet Isaiah speaks to a downtrodden, lost people. A people who have forgotten who and whose they are. And they more than likely wondered if God had forgotten them, if God wanted nothing more to do with them. Maybe they also wondered if God had washed God's hands of them and said, "Not my business. You're in a world of mess - good luck getting out of it." And it is here- into this context- that the prophet Isaiah speaks a message from God that is instead, totally different. We're also going to read a few verses from Luke's account of Jesus' baptism. Jesus, who goes from a toddler to a 30 year old in Luke's account, is now beginning his ministry, and he goes to his cousin, John the Baptist, to be baptized. Let us turn to God's word for us today but first let us **PRAY. READ (NRSV). This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

When I was young, I asked my mom why I was named Jennifer when my two younger siblings were named after family. My mom told me that she and my dad had almost named me Erin Marie but instead last minute they changed my name to Jennifer Elaine. My name "Jennifer" was quite popular for a decade or so before and after I was born. To this day, I don't always turn around when I hear "Jennifer" in a public place. Too many folks share my name. Some of you may have been named after movie stars or family or friends while others names may have been

drawn from a hat or taken from a book. Some of us like our names and some of us don't; however, regardless, we are identified by our names. Some of you have nicknames or street names. Others of you were adopted and may not know the origin of your name. Some of us change our names to try and escape from the pain or shame of our past.

Here both in the words of the prophet Isaiah and in the Gospel of Luke...a claiming and naming take place. A promise that we belong to God takes place. This is our true identity- children of God. This is the promise that we're reminded of every time there is a baptism. Herein Isaiah we go from God saying, "I will be with you"- the most central of all biblical promises to Luke's Gospel revealing God in the flesh- Emmanuel- "God with us" in the person of Jesus Christ being baptized as a kickoff to his ministry. Now why would Jesus need to be baptized? This is long debated question. Jesus didn't need to repent from his sins because he was without sin. Yet, Jesus' baptism shows that he identifies with us as sinners. Jesus identifies with you and me. Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry here on earth. Right after his baptism, Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness for 40 days. His identity was challenged and mocked..."If you are the Son of God..." Just because we're baptized doesn't mean we won't go through hard times or that we no longer sin or that evil and temptations will no longer be around us. This Christian journey is a process. For us, our baptism reminds us that we are beloved children of God, and we renounce anything or anyone who says otherwise." Theologian Rachel Held-Evans says "Baptism is a renunciation of all those competing voices that try to

tell us who we are. The world gives us names according to the color of our skin, or who are parents are or aren't, or where we went to school or didn't go or how much money we make or don't make or where we are from or not from. Names such as screw-up, cheater, fake, addict, loser. The world beckons with these other names but in baptism, just like Jesus, we're named Beloved child of God and that is enough" (theworkofthepeople.com). There is no "we'll be children of God when..." We'll be children of God when we get our stuff together. We'll be children of God when we get married and have children. We'll be children of God when we stop mistreating our neighbor. We'll be children of God when we beat the addiction. We'll be children of God when we stop having doubts. **Friends, by God's grace we're children of God now!**

Baptism marks us, identifies us for the beginning of our faith journey not just for the end. In baptism, we die with Christ...we die to our old ways of life and are raised with Christ into a new way of living: to change how we make decisions, to change how we treat others and ourselves, to change the way that we live and give of ourselves... not just once a year but every day of every year! One scholar puts it this way, "Baptism declares that God is in the business of bringing dead things back to life- including those places in our own hearts- because that's where God works...that's where God gardens and pours out grace. Baptism reminds us that there's no ladder to holiness to climb, no self-improvement plan to follow. It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves

and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our anxiety, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair” (Held-Evans, p. 21 *Searching for Sunday*). Yet, upon our deaths here on earth, our baptisms will be complete. This week my friend was having a conversation with her loved one who was dying. He had lived a very long and full life, yet he was afraid and asked her as a pastor how she knew that he was loved and redeemed by God? My friend told him she knew because he was baptized. She said, “When you’re afraid, remember your baptism. Remember that God loves and claims you because in life and in death, we belong to God.” He died later that day. The image of the opening verses of Isaiah 43 are of a God who redeems what and whom God has created. With Christ, Paul tells us in Romans that death nor evil has the final word. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus...nothing...not bad names, anxiety, depression, addiction...not even death. Herein lies the hope of the gospel! God’s grace is present and real. God’s promise holds true. Death is not the end. Out of death comes life...abundant, new life. In baptism each of us is called to ministry in Christ’s name. Each one of us, so we can’t use the excuse of we aren’t worthy and beloved because God tells us through Jesus that we are. Yes, I’m talking about each one of us.

Unfortunately, sometimes we forget or don’t believe who and whose we are or we hang onto names that don’t define us as children of God. We define ourselves by our circumstances alone, and we begin to believe these definitions. Just as the exiles to whom Isaiah is speaking, who viewed themselves as despised slaves, some of us, at times, feel

unlovable and unworthy of God's love and forgiveness. Yet here the silence of exile and despair is broken by the voice of the One who alone reverses the Israelite's fortune...the One who created them and us...who formed them and us. Isaiah writes of God's words to them and to us, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (43:4). Isaiah calls on the people in exile not to fear for God has redeemed them no matter their past; they are loved and chosen by God. They are called by name. They/we are God's...just as we are. Isaiah doesn't say that God will form you, but rather that God already has formed you. Isaiah doesn't say that God will redeem you when you do such and such but that God has redeemed you. He doesn't say you will one day be God's when you...fill in the blank. Isaiah says that you're already God's. Luke tells of God's Spirit saying to Jesus, "You are my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased (3:22). Some of us may hear these words as trite or cliché. I understand that, and I also invite you to hear them as maybe trite but also very true. For in hearing God's word spoken to our ancestors in faith, our own lives become open to these promises that are as valid today as they were then. Ask yourself if you have truly received God's love and grace? It's one thing to read or hear these words and nod your head with the preacher but how can you really take them in and live them as if they're true?! What would it look to receive God's love and grace and to live as God's beloved in whom God is well pleased?

A woman tells the story of her friend, Jeremy, who is also known as "Twitch" on the streets. Twitch was the name he had been called when

he was in and out of jail before he got clean. The woman said she would call him Jeremy thinking he wouldn't want to be called a name associated with his past. He then said the most extraordinary thing to her. He said he wanted people to keep calling him Twitch so that it would be clear to those who had known him before that he was a transformed child of God. He was afraid that if he started going by Jeremy people might not realize that he was the same Twitch who'd been in jail with them, used with them. He wants them to recognize him and to take heart that God can redeem and transform their lives, too (workingpreacher.org, Callie Plunket-Brewton).

God's love and grace know no bounds. "Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for our failings. It's God saying, 'I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new'" (Nadia Bolz Weber, *Pastrix*). When Jesus is baptized by John, the heavens open, the Spirit of God descends, and a claim is made. A claim we can't earn by what we do. A claim we can't earn by who we are. A claim we can't earn by what we believe. When the heavens open up, a naming also occurs BELOVED. Just as God called Jesus "Beloved" when he came up from the water... we too are named as God's beloved. You see...that's our first name...beloved. Now if we would only "receive God's name for us; believe we're beloved...that is enough" (Held-Evans, p. 19). Here is a simple truth of the Christian faith: God made us in God's image and God loves us. We do not have to earn God's love. In obedient response to that love, we're asked to love God and others. Yes, "we make mistakes, or maybe we just feel

unworthy; however, when we accept Christ's forgiveness and love the enemy within, we live freely in the grace and mercy of God" (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, Vol. 2). That's right...I am talking to you, Beloved. By God's grace...let us all try our best to live out this promise, claim it for ourselves, and share it with others. Thanks be to God we're called by name! Amen.