

“Called By Name”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 Isaiah 43:1-7;– Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might hear your call on our lives and find comfort and purpose as we follow your Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

What are the words you long to hear? Is there something your heart has been aching to be told, even if the rest of you has remained mostly unaware of that need? In times like this past week, as we've watched the fires rage in Los Angeles, we may wish for someone to promise us that “everything will be okay,” but such attempts at comfort soon ring hollow, for we can see with our own eyes that not everything will be okay. Are there words of encouragement that could sustain us more faithfully?

There are a few options in our readings today that might go deeper. Do not fear, for I am with you. You are my child. You are beloved. I have called you by name; you are mine. With you I am well pleased. What is it that you need to hear? Too many of us have personal hang-ups and family histories that have kept us from saying these precious and important truths to one another. Too many of us have lived lifetimes with a dull ache that we were never able to name as a deep need for a beloved, admired parent to say “I love you, and I am so proud of you.” Indeed, I would argue that the pronouncements that came from the heavens at Jesus' baptism are just one more indication of how very human Jesus was; God knew that he, too, needed to hear this reassurance.

Many of us are in a place at the moment when we could use some reassurance. We are grieving. We are fearful. It's almost as if we are living in exile from the world we want to live in. What are the words you long to hear? What is the physical action that accompanies being told "Do not fear" or "You are beloved"? Can you feel that embrace when you imagine your heart receiving those words? Can you lean into that feeling? What shakes loose when you open your heart to believing that God has called you by name and claimed you? What breaks open when you dare to accept that God is well pleased with you?

It may not seem like the story of Jesus' baptism connects all that closely to ours. We're sometimes more familiar with the way Matthew tells the story, with John trying to argue that Jesus should be baptizing him instead of the other way around. It seems to emphasize how singular Jesus and his baptism were, not at all like the ones we went through centuries later. But did you notice how Luke's version is different? What I've noticed about Luke's version is that it starts with "all the people". All the people and also Jesus were baptized, Luke tells us. Let's assume the writer put it that way on purpose. One could argue that Luke's gospel is the one most intent on opening the action up to the readers, all the people. Luke does want us to see our baptisms as connected to Jesus' baptism. And that means those words are for us too. You are my child. You are beloved. With you I am well pleased.

The other thing I think it's important to notice about this story is the timing. It's not God saying to Jesus "with you I am well pleased" while he's hanging on the

cross, having done all he was sent to do, with his hour near completion. He hasn't even gotten started yet! We don't even know if he's good at it or not yet. And that's important. You are God's beloved not because of anything you've done or anything you may yet do. You are God's beloved because you are. Before and no matter if you ever do anything consequential. God is so glad you are here.

To follow Jesus is to first and foremost listen to the words of God. In Luke's story, it's not while he's coming up out of the water (who can even hear what someone's saying as the water is rushing off your ears?!), but while he's praying afterward that the Dove alights upon him and Jesus is given this blessing. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." To what degree does everything that comes after that depend on Jesus hearing that blessing and taking it to heart?

What would it mean to live our lives believing that we are God's beloved child with whom God is well pleased? What would it look like to live with a constant remembrance that this is true of everyone else too? We cannot claim that opening-up that Luke offers without recognizing that it welcomes everyone else in as well. In Isaiah, we see the prophet trying to make sense of exile and international affairs while helping the Hebrew people hold onto their sense of specialness. I will give entire peoples in exchange for you, Isaiah has God promising. But Jesus has taught us that our belovedness does not have to come at the price of someone else's exclusion. Would we want to belong to a god who values some of us more than others of us? Can we grow beyond the need for exclusive benefits, the simplistic belief that

something is valuable only if others can't have it? Think of the burdens your heart is carrying now. Are any of them made lighter by someone else's suffering? Being loved doesn't require that someone else is not loved. That's not how God's love works.

So what are the words you long to hear? What are the promises your heart needs to have repeated today? What are the words you need to share with someone else? Do not fear, for I am with you. I have called you by name; you are mine. You are beloved. With you I am well pleased. I am so glad you are here. I will walk alongside you, no matter what comes. You matter, not because of what you do, but because you are.

Hear these promises. Feel their impact. No really, take a moment and feel their impact. Close your eyes and imagine what it feels like to have God saying: You are my child. You are beloved. Don't be afraid. I am with you. I am delighted by your existence. I see your grief. I see your pain and your fear. Lay it down here; let me carry that for you. Let's walk this path together.

And now, while you still have your eyes closed, think for just a moment about who some of the other people are that you might need to say these things to. Family members? Friends? Don't assume they already know. Think of the impact of hearing it again, hearing it said carefully and intentionally, for no other reason than that you want them to remember it.

And then stretch a little farther, and deeper down into prayer, and try to imagine someone you don't even know, someone who's maybe never had anyone speak such love into their life before. And take a moment to send this love to them, whoever they are. I can't tell you how it will reach them, but somehow, some way, I believe that it will.

Now let's just sit here for a moment longer, on the lap of God, fully accepting the love of God into our very beings, fully opening ourselves to being channels of that love, from God into the world. It might leak out your eyes. It might make your breath catch. It might make you go out after worship and say something lovely but a little embarrassing to a family member or friend, or even a complete stranger. That's okay. Do not be afraid. God is with us. You are beloved. You are called by name. We are so glad you are here. Hallelujah and Amen.