

Called by Name

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Isaiah 43:1-7

There was a sign taped to the door of the hospital room. It said, "Her name is Mary." I heard the story of this sign at the memorial service for beloved former colleague Mary Mohlke in November. She was beloved by many, including several others in this sanctuary, like staff members Becky and Jane, and Carolyn in the choir. You see, Mary was a giant in the Presbyterian world of Christian Education. She merged her creative, artistic passions with her deep intellect and spirituality, and helped shape the ministries of so many church members, educators, and pastors. I count myself among them. If you needed resources or ideas for ministry, she was the go-to person. She was so accomplished, so well-respected. Once named Presbyterian Christian Educator of the Year. She was a tireless advocate for the status and recognition of women in all kinds of ministry.

At her memorial service, her son talked about the last week of Mary's life. She was in the hospital, and at that point very weak. He told about the parade of hospital staff who would come into her room and call her "honey," or "sweetie," presumably because they cared for so many patients on a daily basis, and couldn't remember all of their names, or maybe didn't have time to look at the chart. How are you doing, honey? Well, if you knew Mary at all, staunch feminist that she was, you knew she was nobody's "hon" or "honey" or "dearie" or "sweetie" or "cupcake" or anything of the like. Even in her weakest final days, tethered to medical equipment, it would annoy her to no end. So her family created a sign and taped it at the entrance of her hospital room for all to see. It said, "Her name is Mary." As her son shared the story, we all nodded and laughed.

Names are important.

Some years back, I led weekly children's worship with a group of pre-k through second graders. Every week we had a little ritual – we would sing a song of welcome that used every child's name. When they heard their name, they had to stand up. As we sang the song, as many verses as we had children, without exception, all around the circle, every child's face positively radiated with eager anticipation. Each one could hardly wait to hear his or her own name called. And when they did, each was ready and stood up proudly.

Names are important, because they signify our identity. They indicate that we are somebody.

Many of you know that I have a twin sister. Some of you met her in November when she was here for the Grocery Run and for my installation service. When we were born, our parents gave us names that rhyme to signify our "twinness" – Lynette Kay and Jeanette Fay. (Cute, huh?)

For the record, we're both very happy with those names. Now, one of the things about growing up with a twin whose name rhymes with yours is that you'll answer to anything that sounds close. If you hear a name that has "ette" or "nette" at the end of it – Jeanette, Lynette, Annette, Nanette, Claudette – it causes you to turn your head and listen. Was it my name I just heard?

Names are important. And when they are said, they usually call forth a response. But you don't have to have rhyming names for that to happen. You hear your name called, and you look up. You take notice.

Just before New Year's our family flew through Chicago's O'Hare airport on our way back to Rochester. It was a Wednesday, and the weather cooperated for our travel. But it hadn't done so the previous two days, and we passed lines and lines of people whose flights had been cancelled, trying to get their flights rebooked. The gates were crowded with people who were on the standby list, waiting to hear their name called and be released from airport purgatory. It was chaotic enough that day; it must have been even worse the day before.

Chaos - if only its presence in life were limited to that of overcrowded airports. But we all know it's not so. In the Biblical witness, there has been chaos from the very beginning. The ancients said that when God began the work of creation, the earth was a formless mass of chaos – sometimes characterized as turbulent and stormy seas, or sometimes as an angry chaos monster.

In a sermon he once preached, noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann said that “it turns out the Bible is much more preoccupied with the threat of chaos than it is with sin and guilt, our middle-class fascinations notwithstanding...The storm [of chaos] produces a more elemental... anxiety, a sense of deep helplessness because you cannot touch it anywhere or handle it or measure it or hold it. It is bottomless in size and beyond measure in force...”¹

And that's the imagery that's in play in today's first Scripture reading from the portion of the Old Testament sometimes called Second Isaiah. The people of Israel were deported into exile in Babylon, an experience that was utter desolation. A chapter earlier describes “a people robbed and plundered, all of them trapped in holes and hidden in prisons”...victims with no one to rescue them, no one to claim them and restore them. In the prophetic worldview of Second Isaiah, because they'd failed to remain obedient and faithful servants, God gave them up to their captors, pouring upon them the fire of divine anger and the brutality of war.

No doubt we could spend considerable time debating whether it literally was an act of divine anger to send the people into exile; or whether we take issue with that - that it was the theological interpretation of the human prophetic writer – a way to try to make sense of the senseless. We'll save that theological debate for another time (or we'd still be here when it's time for the Boar's Head festival!).

Regardless, the narrative describes a people of paradox – chosen by God, yet all evidence pointed to the contrary. Chaos is an imagery that Brueggemann says Second Isaiah uses “to say what Babylonian exile was like, a deportation and a disconnect from all that was familiar, into a hostile environment that tried to take away all semblance and signs of hope...nothing is reliable or safe...all the old certitudes gone, all old power arrangements failed, all old moral convictions in jeopardy.”²

Chaos. And it's into that abject chaos that God's reality-changing announcement breaks in: “But now...” That was then, “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.” “But now...when you pass through the chaos – the water, the rivers, the fire, and the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “Uttered Beyond Fear,” *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, Vol. 2.*

² Brueggemann, *Collected Sermons.*

flame – I will be with you. They will not overtake you, they will not consume you. Do not fear. I have called you by name.”

How many of us grew up with the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me”? Well, it’s just not always true. The wrong name *can* hurt, whether it’s the hurtful name someone else called you, or the one you called yourself. I can imagine that the Babylonians had a few choice names for their captives. I can imagine that those names would have been hurtful. Probably ones that wouldn’t be suitable for Sunday morning in church. Those slurs probably added to their misery, said time after time until they were embedded into their spirits so deeply and so heavily that their heads hung low and their shoulders drooped and their arms went limp and their feet dragged.

And then the voice of God called them by name – not the disparaging labels hoisted on them by their captors – but by their God-given name. The voice of God called them by name – not the harsh names they may have given themselves – captive, worthless, forgotten one - but by their God-given name of one ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

And I can imagine their ears perk up, their heads lift, their shoulders straighten, and maybe even pent-up tears begin to flow. I can even imagine them rise to their feet as they hear themselves called by the name they were meant to hear – their God-given name: precious, honored one, Beloved.

“Some texts scream “universal” in the way they grab us,” writes Valerie Bridgeman Davis. This is such a text. In our contemporary world, while we ourselves may not be in exile, many are. The chaotic and the intensely difficult overwhelm. Personal turmoil, family turmoil, social turmoil, political turmoil, economic turmoil, racial turmoil, religious turmoil. It’s all there. The sudden loss that turns your world upside down. Family members estranged from one another. Anxiety that looks to more guns as the answer. Politics fueled by fear. Neighborhoods without meaningful employment. Muslims ejected from public gatherings. Distrust of immigrants who just want a better future.

The human condition is one of chaos. And in those difficult and lonely and broken places – who among us does not long to hear the assurance that we have not been forgotten? Who among us does not long to be called Beloved?

According to Luke, when Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, a voice came from heaven and said to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved.” This name signified the core of his identity - who he really was. And, his name shaped the way he lived and loved the world.

Names are important. In baptism, God calls us by our God-given name - “Beloved.” And when God calls us by name, it calls forth a response. It shapes the way we are to live and love, as it shaped the way Jesus lived and loved. It calls us as individuals. It calls us as a gathered community of faith. It calls us to collectively lift our eyes and raise our heads, to stand up and grab our carry-ons filled with Christ’s love, and enter the chaos where others need to hear their God-given names, and know that they are Beloved, too.

Amen.