

SERMON: God Knows Your Name

TEXT: Isaiah 43:1-7

When I was growing up there was a local children's television program called *Lunch with Casey*. Casey Jones was a train engineer and he would sit down at a table, open up his lunch bag, and share cartoons, stories, songs, and silliness. His sidekick was Roundhouse Rodney, who was especially silly. I remember him singing *Walking in My Winter Underwear* while dressed in long johns outside in the snow.

Once a week, Casey would recognize children who were celebrating birthdays. While the names scrolled across the bottom of the screen and the birthday song played in the background, Casey would read them aloud. One day near my fifth birthday the whole family was gathered around the TV, watching *Lunch with Casey*, and waiting for my name. When it appeared on the screen, everyone cheered with delight. Except for me. I started to cry and ran into the next room. My big brother came in to find out why I was upset. "I didn't hear it," I sobbed. Everyone was cheering too loud, and I didn't get to hear Casey say my name.

It was a big deal to me, and my brother – who was a teenager at the time – was surprisingly kind and understanding. It's one of the few memories I have of him, since he died about a year later. The other thing I remember is the nickname he had for me: *El Smell*. I actually liked that name because it made me laugh, and it made me feel like he cared about me, like we had a special connection. (By the way, nobody else is allowed to call me that, so don't even think about it!)

Names are important. More important than we sometimes realize. If you've ever agonized and researched and debated over what to name a baby when it has yet to come into the world, you know what I mean. The typical argument includes reasons such as, it's an old person's name, the name of a former boyfriend or girlfriend, the neighborhood bully when you were a kid, alternate and unwanted meanings of the name, and so on.

Many religions and cultures have a tradition of a naming ceremony for newborn babies and sometimes older children. Such ceremonies are very similar to baptism; not only is it a formal naming of a child, but it can also include a blessing for the baby and family. It is a time when parents can make certain promises and commitments to their child, and for other important people in the child's life to give well wishes and pledge their support. In Christian baptism, the

person's first and middle names are spoken, then either enters the water or is sprinkled with water and baptized *in the name* of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Whatever other words may be included, these are the most important.

The words of God, spoken to the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah are very powerful. "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." Now let me read those words again, and as I do, silently put your own name in place of Jacob and Israel. "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."

Following this, we hear some of the most amazing promises of God. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 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. 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. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from

the west I will gather you; 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 – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

When my daughter Shelby was two or three years old, we were visiting my home church in Minnesota. She didn't want to go to the nursery, so she sat with me in the worship service. As the congregation stood to sing the Gloria Patri after the Assurance of Forgiveness, Shelby stood on the pew. When we finished singing, she told me with great excitement in her voice, “Mommy, they said my name!” It took me a moment to realize what she meant. And then it dawned on me. “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever *Shelby*.” At that moment Shelby knew she belonged. She belonged in church. She belonged to God.

GOD KNOWS YOUR NAME. God calls you by name. God claims you by name. That idea can be both comforting and intimidating at the same time. Sort of like when your parents called you using your full name, you knew you were in trouble! Furthermore, when God calls us by name, we can't pretend he's talking to somebody else.

One commentary I read noted, “Not even the greatest dangers in [Israel’s] past can intimidate Yahweh’s people. The reference to *waters* and *rivers* not only recalls the threats presented by the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14-15), but by the primeval chaos waters that were thought to surround the heavens and the earth (note Genesis 7:11). The *fire* and *flame* of more recent memory represent the horrors of military destruction, such as the conflagration that destroyed Jerusalem and sent [Isaiah’s] generation into exile. Not even these terrors are capable of undoing Yahweh’s people, because ‘*I will be with you.*’”

Such words of total and unwavering commitment are common in romantic music and poetry, but can be hard to find in the human realm. Also note that even the unconditional and eternal love of God does not put an end to pain and suffering. We will never be immune to floods and fires and the tragedies of life, but we can always depend on God’s promise of presence and belonging. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.”

Such love and acceptance is what gives us confidence and courage and empowers us for ministry. Today we remember the baptism of Jesus, and it is important to recognize the sequence of events. John had baptized many people that day, “and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was

opened, 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.’” It is only after this event, when God names and claims Jesus as his own beloved Son, does Jesus begin his ministry.

In the same way, it is important for us to recognize and remember where we come from, to whom we belong, and that we are completely loved and accepted, before we can ever hope to continue the ministry of Christ in our world. It is important for us to take God’s words with us: “Do not fear; I am with you.”

For all who have been baptized, named, and claimed, the sacramental meal we share at this table becomes the remembrance and the celebration of our belonging and of God’s complete and unconditional love. This spiritual food nourishes and strengthens our spirits to live as beloved servants of God.

GOD KNOWS YOUR NAME. *You* belong to God. And *you* are called by name and invited to come and take *your* place at the table. You are invited to feast upon God’s abundant and everlasting love for *you*. May *you* find *your* greatest hunger and thirst satisfied, and may *you* be inspired to go and share this good news... to the glory of God! AMEN.