

## A New Name

### Matthew 3:13-17 - The Baptism of Jesus

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

So we've moved beyond the baby in the manger – and even the child in the house visited by the 3 Magi bearing their gifts. But while the season of parties and gifts is long gone, our journey with Jesus continues. And today it fast forwards 30 years to his baptism.

There are not a lot of stories that appear in all four of the Gospels – the books which tell the story and stories of Jesus' life – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Since they're each telling the story from different perspectives and times, they have different stories in them. So, when a piece of the story appears in all four, we know that it was important to them at the time and important for them to share with us.

In all four versions, there is the giving of the Spirit, and in three of them it is accompanied by a voice from heaven pronouncing that Jesus' is God's beloved Son, a child with whom God is most pleased.

If we had any doubt that the baby born in Bethlehem actually WAS the Son of God, what happen at his baptism confirms with God's own voice who he is. One ancient theologian (Chrysostom) believed that Jesus' baptism was MORE important than his birth – because that's when he became known to everyone.

This is Jesus' IPO – initial public offering – when his life begins a new chapter and we are all witnesses to it, and if we buy in...well, the rewards are heavenly.

Whatever else Jesus' baptism may mean, it is the place where **who** he is – Jesus – is connected to **whose** he is – God's beloved Son. Jesus is given the intertwined gifts of both identity and affirmation.

And this is where these stories of Jesus' baptism intersect with the stories of our own. For we can only live into the mission that God has set before us to the degree that we hear and believe the good news that we, too, are beloved children of God. As with Jesus, we discover **who** we are by hearing definitively **whose** we are.

Because that's what baptism is - the formal declaration that we are God's beloved children. That no matter where we go, God will be with us. That no matter what we may do, God is for us and will not abandon us.

In baptism we are blessed with the promise of God's Spirit and given a name; and we're all given the same name - and that name is Christian, in which we are marked with the cross of Christ and named a beloved child of God forever.

This matters so much because names are powerful. Some we have chosen; others have been given to us. Some lift us up; others tear us down. Whatever the case, names are powerful. But the message for today is that no matter how powerful our earthly names, they do not ultimately define us. Our true identity is the name given to us by God alone: the name of beloved child.

Let's do a little exercise in our minds. Think about some of the names you've been called in your life – the more difficult names - the names that no matter how long ago they were uttered can stick in our memories, causing momentary pain or even lasting destruction.

Names like "Stupid" or "Egghead," "Fatso," or "Ugly." Names like "Loser," "Know-it-all," or "Victim." But don't worry, we're not going to stay long on these names...

Because the point is that God says to you, "No! That is not your name. Because you are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased."

God has forever been renaming people – giving them a new identity since the beginning: Abram and Sarai – Abraham and Sarah; Jacob – Israel; Simon – Peter; Saul – Paul. And these new names set them on a new path.

Baptism has from the early days of the church involved the receiving of a new name. This was (and is) called christening. And originally, there was no distinction between christening and baptism. To "christen" somebody meant to bring them into the Christian community by way of baptism, which has always been recognized as the sacramental doorway into Christianity.

Christening is to Christ-en – and is actually not part of our/Congregational tradition. Roman Catholics have the practice of giving a child being baptized (and also at confirmation) a "Christian" name – usually a recognized saint name.

And while it's not our tradition to Christen – still, in baptism we do receive a new name – beloved, child of God. And as we know, names do indeed shape who we are and who we become.

In Jesus' case, his name and his destiny were one and the same. Jesus is a form of the Hebrew Joshua, meaning "the one who saves" or "Savior." His name meant who he was - the spiritual liberator of his people. Little did Joseph and Mary know how this name and role would ultimately play itself out.

In the humiliating rejection from his own people, leading to his crucifixion and death, God would cancel the failure and guilt resulting from human self-centeredness. And in the resurrection of Jesus, he would open dead-end streets, creating a highway leading to forgiveness, and new life and life eternal.

When God gave Jesus his name – he had his life's purpose in mind.

It's the same for us. When we receive the name Christian, God affirms us as his own and opens the future to us as members of his family. To raise our children as God's own children is a

worthy endeavor, not just for the parents and Godparents, but for whole Christian communities. On our baptismal days, God opens a door to us he will never shut.

On Christmas Eve, the last reading of the Lessons and Carols is opening lines of the Gospel of John... the Word became flesh so that all who receive him may be given power to become children of God. And today we are reminded that we, like Jesus, discover who we are by hearing once again **whose** we are, God's own beloved child.

And you know, I think we are living at a time when the question of identity has never been more pressing, for there are so many places from which we receive and construct our identities. Every pixel - from the largest screens to the smallest screens - is telling us who we should be, what we should think is attractive, or funny, or important; that who we are is connected to what we drive or what we eat or what we wear.

But so little of this is life-giving, and none of it is redemptive/saving.

The gift of identity and affirmation is one of the great themes of the Christian faith, and it sends us forth from this place armed with our primary name – Christian – so that we may face the various challenges and opportunities before us knowing that we are God's own beloved children.

A Presbyterian pastor in Georgia tells this story:

It was Christmas-time and I was in the office of the inner-city congregation where I served when the intercom buzzed. “There is a young man here who wants to see you,” said the secretary. I knew what that meant. There were many homeless people in the neighborhood, and they all asked for money, especially at Christmas. But the emergency shelter relief office was closed, so I said, “Sure, show him in.”

He was not what I expected. He was neatly dressed, clean-shaven, in his late twenties. There was an air of dignity about him, with no glassy look and none of the usual signs of having been on the streets.

“Sorry to take your time,” he apologized, “but I just want your blessing.” He did not seem depressed or desperate but in good spirits, polite and very much in control. I attempted to explain that Presbyterians did not usually confer blessings, but the man was not there for a lesson in ecclesiology. “All I want is your blessing,” he said again.

And so, I agreed and asked his name. “Andy,” he said and knelt on the carpet while I offered a general prayer of thanksgiving for God’s presence in Andy’s life, an acknowledgement of the ways God had already blessed him and God’s continuing concern and purpose for him. When I said “Amen,” Andy stood, smiled, shook my hand, thanked me and left.

I still have no idea of the precise character of the blessings Andy sought. I sensed that it wasn’t superficial absolution for some insignificant sin. He was struggling, seeking some assurance that his life counted, that it had some purpose he had not found or had lost touch with.

So much of our identity is wrapped up in what we do... Or for some perhaps located entirely in what we do. The question “Who am I?” is much harder to answer than “What do you do?” And locating our identity in what we do – our jobs for instance – is not a sure foundation, especially these days. Who are you when you lose your job, or you retire, or you parents die and you’re no longer a son or a daughter?

Martin Luther, 500 years ago, said that when he was despairing, and seemed to be overwhelmed with the challenges of the emperor, pope, peasants rebellion, etc., he would write with his finger in Latin in the dust on Katy’s uncleaned table, *Baptizatus sum*, or “I have been baptized.” It was his reminder that no matter what a day might bring, tomorrow was always God’s gift to him whether here or in eternity.

He also suggested that when we wash our face in the morning – pouring water on it – that we should remember that we are children of God and that our identity as beloved was sealed in baptism. Luther knew – and I think we all know – that we need to be reminded of and reaffirmed in our true identity every day.

And those words – “You are my beloved Son/ daughter in whom I am well pleased” – aren’t they words we all want to hear. Don’t all children seek first the approval of their parents? Many even will spend a lifetime chasing after approval and affection from all sorts of people and sources. And all the while – God is whispering / shouting – you are my child, I’m pleased with you!

But where and when do we actually hear this? I mean actually hear the words of God’s blessing for us. When a baby is baptized, they hear it, though they don’t understand it – when you were baptized you were given these words of blessing. But have you heard them since?

Let’s try it now – turn to someone near you, and say these words to them:

**You are God’s beloved child and he is pleased with you.**

How was that? Awkward? Uncomfortable? Isn’t it interesting that in a Christian church we are uncomfortable speaking the simplest of words of the faith to each other? And I wonder if it’s awkward for us because we’re not used to hearing or saying these words of blessing..

What if you said that to your children every night when you put them to bed; or in the morning when they wake up? **You are God’s beloved child and he is pleased with you.**

What if those were the last words you said to your spouse before falling asleep? **You are God’s beloved child and he is pleased with you.**

What if those were the words you spoke to your father / mother / sibling who lives on the other side of the country before you hang up? **You are God’s beloved child and he is pleased with you.**

As those who have been blessed by God, what a privilege it is for us to bless each other, and not just here within these walls, but beyond as well.

Amen.