

First Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 1:26-38, “Called by Name”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 12/1/2024

You might not know that I began my seminary training before I was Presbyterian.
I had just finished up two years of working in university ministry
at University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, when I enrolled
at Regent College.

I quickly realized that it would be better if I joined a church team
before graduating, so I quickly signed up for the new members class at UPC.
Part of the new member class information pack was a set of questions
(which I stole and made part of our membership class material.)

The question that still strikes me every time I read it is this:
“When did you first learn that God knows your name?”

It’s striking because the direction of the question is almost the opposite of
“When did you find Jesus?” (as though Jesus was lost or hiding).
Rather, it points to the time when we realized we were
intimately and personally known by the Creator of all things.

When did you first learn that God knows your name?
For me it was when I prayed with my Sunday School teacher
under an oak tree behind my church in Vancouver, Washington.

For you it could be a gradual, growing awareness throughout your life,
a moment of recognizing God’s love for you is bigger than your mistakes,
or a crisis where you realized that charting your own path
wasn’t going to bring you contentment and joy.

Maybe it was during an outburst of desperate prayer.
Or maybe you aren’t sure that God really does know your name.

I think it matters that God calls people by name
because it shows us that God is a personal being
who relates to us directly, not just as a force or plan or ethical principle.

Today we have two scripture passages that
concern people whom God called by name.

The ancient Hebrew people who descended from Jacob,
and Mary the mother of Jesus.

There are quite a few parallels in their experiences that helps us understand
the implications of being people who are known to God by name.

Our reading from Isaiah 43 begins with strong words of redirection: “But now!”
The prior passage in Isaiah 42 describe the wrath of God toward
faithless Israel:

**“Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see!
Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one in covenant with me,
blind like the servant of the LORD?
You have seen many things, but have paid no attention;
your ears are open, but you hear nothing.”**

And so, the Lord allowed Israel to be plundered and looted by the Babylonians,
which means the prophet Isaiah was not speaking to Israelites
sitting in Jerusalem, praising Yahweh in the temple and thinking about
how good they had it as the chosen people of God.

This was while they were in *exile*, displaced from their home,
far from the place of promise, far from feeling at secure,
far from the comforts we associate with “blessing.”

Sometimes exile happens when someone is physically excluded from their home,
and sometimes exile happens when we are relationally or culturally
disconnected. When we suddenly feel like
we aren’t wanted or don’t belong.

Being exiled is being a nobody, a no-name.
Have you ever felt exiled in your life?

Recognizing the bad news of exile helps us to hear
the tremendously good news of God-with-us,
which is why we must notice those first two words
in Isaiah 43: “But now!”

You were plundered and abandoned and in exile,
but now **“Do not fear, for I, Yahweh, have summoned you by name.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.”**

I hear in these lines the threat of death in the Exodus: the waters of the Red Sea,
the pillar of fire that separated the Hebrews from the armies of Egypt.
Israel passed by them both and was unharmed because Yahweh,
their redeemer, was with them.

In that great salvation moment for ancient Israel,
God called the people of Israel by *name*: YOU ARE MY PEOPLE!
God was their deliverance from slavery and victory
over death through the Passover.

So, back to Isaiah 43, while they were still in Babylonian exile,
despondent and suffering,
Isaiah declared to them that they would once again
know the salvation of God,
that they would experience a second exodus,
that God would yet deliver them as a people
whom Yahweh knows and loves.

The result will be that God’s children from all around the world –
from north, south, east, and west, will be gathered together,
and they will be restored for the glory of God’s name.

*When we are feeling most isolated, most alone, punished for failure or
punished unjustly, we can remember that God calls us by name,
and God remembers promises made long ago.*

And so it was that, hundreds of years later, an angel arrived in Mary's room.

And the angel says, **"Greetings, you who are highly favored!
The Lord is with you."**

Both of these are related to the hope of Advent which is
Immanuel: God with us.

Despite the kind words, Mary is greatly troubled,
probably because angels
are powerful creatures from another dimension.
So the angel says, "Do not be afraid, Mary,
you have found favor with God."

The angel Gabriel knows Mary's name.
She is not random. She is not just anyone. She is Mary,
who has found favor with God.

The result will be a child born to her who will fulfill all the promises
made to King David – a new kingdom (but not an earthly kingdom)
which will never end.

And so I see four parallels in the message of Yahweh delivered hundreds of years
apart from Isaiah and the angel Gabriel:

Isaiah: Do not fear
Gabriel: Do not be afraid

Isaiah: When you pass through the waters *I will be with you.*
Gabriel: *The Lord is with you.*

Isaiah: "I have called you by name"
Gabriel: speaks her name, "Mary"

Isaiah: promise of redemption.
Gabriel: promise of a redeemer: the Son of the Most-High God who will
reign forever.

These parallel features show me a pattern of how God's blessing
arrives in the world. When we move away from fear toward trust,
when we recognize the presence and activity of God
who is with us by the Holy Spirit,
when we engage with God as someone
who knows our name,
then we share in the promised redemption of God
which comes through Jesus Christ.

Mary's response to this is a wonderful summary of the life of faith:
"May it be to me according to your word."

When my father was a young man, he worked in Montana fighting forest fires.
He frequently told a story of working a particularly active fire,
with flames crowning from one tree to the next.
His team was desperately trying to establish a firebreak
so they could stop the spread of destruction.

There were trees that were surrounding my father that were smoldering
when suddenly he heard someone shout his name, "JOHN!"

He looked up, and a huge, burning tree was about to topple down
right where he stood. He ran out of the way
just before the tree came crashing down.

If his teammate hadn't known his name, what would have happened?
If he had just heard someone calling out, "Hey!" or "Watch out!"
would it have grabbed his attention?

But he heard someone call out his name, "John!"
and that made him aware of danger, and enabled him to escape.

This Advent, listen for the call of your Creator. You are not a no-name to God.
Jesus calls you by name and invites you to share in promise
of *Immanuel*, God-with-us, which has been God's desire
from the days of Isaiah, to Mary the mother of Jesus,
to the present day.

Listen! Hear your name called by God. You are not an accident.

Do not fear the flooding waters, the roaring flames.
You are redeemed. You belong to the One who holds all things together.