

Named and Claimed
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

One of the joys of being a designated and interim pastor is getting to know so many people. The challenge is to learn not just your names (that's hard enough), it's also getting to know who you are. Who is related to who, who has a long family history in town, who does what in the church, who are the movers and shakers and who are the traditionalists. So, tell me - Who are you? The answer to that question is worth knowing, and I do not mean just a casual way. To know who you, who you really are, is a truth worth knowing.

That is the point of today's Scripture. In effect, today's gospel readings is an introduction of Jesus Christ, it begins to reveal to us who Jesus really is. Of course, we have the advantage of learning about Jesus since Sunday School days. But the people of Jesus' day did not. The crowds who came to John were excited by all that was happening around him. So excited, in fact, that they were wondering just who John is. Certainly, they knew some things about him. They knew his name, they knew his words, they knew his work.

But they did not know his claim. Just who was John? Was he a teacher, a prophet, or something more? Might he be the Promised One, God's Messiah? Who he was would make a world of difference to them, because if he was the Messiah then receiving his baptism would give them the surety of God's blessing. John's claim would put his work in perspective and give it its due authority and power.

John does not hesitate to reply to the crowds' questions, or their hopes. He lets them know that as good as his words are, as good as his baptism is, it is not all there is. He is not the Chosen One of God. In fact, he sees himself as less than a slave compared to the One whom God will send. The Messiah will do more, give more and accomplish more, because he is more. The Messiah will have all God's power, and he will pour out, not water, but the Spirit and fire. He will clear and cleanse, reap and harvest. His coming will be the good news of God's salvation, which Israel had anticipated for generations.

So, when Jesus came among the crowd, when he was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, and as he bowed before God in prayer, God sent his full anointing on Jesus. Heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit fell upon him. God spoke the word of affirmation. God named him and claimed him – "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." That was the introduction of Jesus to the world. Unmistakable and undeniable. Here was God's chosen One. And that choice was more than just a nice word and a pat on the head. You are my Son, the Beloved, and you have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, for my work of salvation.

That was the foundation of Christ's life and ministry. It was central to the gospel, decisive for the apostles and essential to the life of the church in every generation. In our baptism (if it is more than a little water), we are named as God's own beloved child. That is God's claim, and that is God's gift. That was the 'something more' John anticipated – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all who believe. Without the Spirit no amount of water can cleanse our soul, no amount of seeking will provide a word, and no amount of desire will produce the life of God. But through Christ, and through His Spirit, we are made children of God (Romans 8, 14-17).

Jesus' baptism was more than a rite, more than a name. It was God's anointing of Jesus, the empowerment of the Spirit as the Christ, the Servant of God. And the Holy Spirit is God's anointing on us, as brothers and sisters of Christ, that we may be empowered to be his servants today. For each of us, through the one who 'baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire', we are named, claimed and empowered as God's own. We are named and claimed not only in love, and for love, but also for a purpose, for serving God's good will in our world today. Our purpose is imbedded in Christ, as Martin Luther once said 'every Christian is a 'little Christ'. That is a tall order, isn't it? But really, it is not an order it is a gift, a gift from God. That is the power of our baptism. We are named and claimed. We are named God's beloved child, just like Christ. And we are claimed as God's servant, just like Christ.

You have been baptized into Christ. Your parents initiated you into that promise, and you validated it in your confirmation. You are here today because that baptism still holds meaning and power for you. You are here because you know yourselves to be God's beloved children (or you may need a reminder) and you are here because you are committed to serving God's purpose (and you may also want some encouragement.) And I can think of no better way to connect with the promise of our baptism, than to speak again our words of affirmation.

Affirmation of Baptism

Do you desire to affirm your baptism into the faith and family of Jesus Christ? (I do).

Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ? (I do.)

Do you profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? (I do.)

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of our Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able? (I promise, with the help of God.)

Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith, and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence and furthering Christ's mission in the world? (I promise, with the help of God.)

Prayer of Disciples

O God, my God, known to me in Jesus Christ, I give myself to you as your own, to love and serve you faithfully all the days of my life. Amen.

Blessing

And now, may the One who called us to his own glory and excellence give you everything you need for life and godliness. 2 Peter 1:3, adj

Amen