

# Named, Claimed and Loved

January 3, 2016

So very early on in my ministry, there was a little guy, Jody, who had to have his tonsils out. He was seven or eight years old, and he came from a very modest home in a blue-collar town. He was alone in the room and I walked in. He was a little nervous; I was a little nervous. But his first statement just caught me by surprise. He said, "I live on a dead-end street." And I thought, "Good heavens! I hope that's not the only way this guy is going to define himself as he grows up!"

But he was part of the children's choir of the church. And Andre Wehrli, the choirmaster, working with the youth of the church, taught him about discipline, and self-respect, and about the love of God. And the congregation really worked at lifting him up and caring for him in wonderful ways.

So – spoiler alert! – I don't know how he turned out. But I know that he had a much better chance of making life work, something beyond just a dead-end street, as he moved into school, and jobs, and grew up.

There are many kinds of dead-end streets, I suppose. There's dead-end jobs, and dead-end relationships, and courses of action that lead us to dead ends sometimes. But I want to ask what is it that makes for a dead-end experience or for a vital-life experience? One big difference, I think, comes from choir directors, and teachers, and faithful people in our lives of all shapes and sizes. Those who mediate the knowledge that we are named, and, claimed, and loved by God . . . by that same spirit that blessed Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River.

Now, it's pretty curious that Pastor Bridget asked me to preach on the baptism of Jesus, and then to mix it with New Year's resolutions and aspirations. It just complicates the whole task. Just last week, we celebrated Jesus' birth, a newborn baby in the manger, and it was lovely . . . beautiful . . . inspiring. But it reminds me of a movie that Will Ferrell stars in as Ricky Bobby – "*Talladega Nights*." Some of you have seen it, I can see that. There's this scene where they're sitting around the table and Ricky Bobby is praying to dear little baby Jesus. On and on and on, and his wife reminds him baby Jesus did grow up. And then, when he's challenged, he says, "Look. I like the baby version best!"

*Dear eight-pound, six-ounce newborn infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet. Just a little infant, all cuddly, but still omnipotent. Thank you for your power and your grace, dear baby God.*

I do not mean to be disrespectful. I cannot do it like Will Ferrell did it. But sometimes it's important how we pivot and how we connect that celebration at Christmas with the celebration at the river with Jesus' baptism. Ricky Bobby would probably not appreciate this week's lesson from the gospel of Luke. Jesus, now grown and stepping forward to

be baptized along with others in the Jordan. Here the dearest child born to Mary, now named and claimed as the beloved of God.

The baptism of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit makes this dance with God much more than just a nice story with special lights. Luke approximates the claims of the other gospels, but he removes John the Baptist discreetly so that the picture and the focus would be on Jesus who followed in the same line and traditions and much of the similar teachings as John the Baptist, but now with a new identity clearly stated in the voice of that spirit.

John Peterson translates the passage, ***“After all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized. As he was praying, the sky opened up and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descending, came down on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: ‘You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.’”***

Name is so important, especially in the Bible. A good name is very important, and it always carries special meanings. In fact, here is one that we often will refer to as the name above all names; that is, the Messiah. But that name, for those who follow in his ways, marks our lives, and our homes, and our families, and our world with meaning, and identity, and destiny. We identify with God’s beloved child. Here is where we connect with the reading from Luke’s gospel in a special way . . . in the understanding of the Bond of Union. Remember, we just read it together. Each Sunday we read that we will “strive to make the Christ Spirit dominant in our lives and in all human relations.” That spirit that is celebrated at the baptism is the spirit that permeates our efforts and our ministry.

Whether you have big plans and big resolutions or modest plans for the new year – how many make resolutions, by the way? Good luck with that. Whether we make grandiose resolutions and plans, or not so big plans, what is it that guides us in that? Of all the powers and spirits that are floating around in our world today – fear, blind ambition, bullying, generosity, goodwill – which of those spirits do we claim, and which ones become incorporated into our efforts?

While many will be working on defining a New Year’s resolution, there’s an even bigger goal and a more lofty challenge as we move into the new year for each of our lives and for the life of this community of believers. For we are named by something bigger than just who we are and what our history is. We are named as we discover the truth of God’s magnificent love in Jesus the Christ. Bigger than even what we dare to hope to accomplish.

I dream for our seven-month-old granddaughter that she would discover the truth of God’s magnificent love with the experiences of growing up . . . that she would somehow deep in her very soul come to know she is a child chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life. She’s going to get that from her grandfather and from her family, but I want her to know that that comes from a far greater source.

I have a colleague who makes a point to say this particular affirmation to his granddaughter every time he sees her. He sits down, face to face, and in clear and simple language he says, "God loves you just the way you are and there's nothing you can do to change that." He wants that to be anchor whatever other belief systems she may develop. This is a grandfather's everyday language way of proclaiming forward the impact and the import of the proclamation of that heavenly voice affirming the person and the mission of Jesus at the river baptism. You're my child, chosen, marked by my love, pride of my life. And so we proclaim that same, holy intention moving forward in our lives and in the lives of those we meet and those we love in particular.

There was a flurry of baptismal activity here last Sunday morning. If you happened to miss it, Alistair Ryan Hyde, Jeremiah James Stewart, and Luana Lucille Baxter were baptized in the name of God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit. What potential lies in that?

Our name and our identity for a new year is important. The biblical names carry meaning and identity. Even back in Matthew's gospel:

*she will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.*

And Jesus was a fairly familiar name – like Michael, John or David of the day – but in this particular case it meant something very special: literally, meaning salvation or the Lord saves. His name and his life were one, showing his meaning, and his identity, and his destiny; and in him we share that same kind of identity and that same kind of destiny.

Today's text shows this in the public appearance in the baptism of Jesus. It captures elements of the meaning and identity and destiny of the Messiah and our part, riding in his coattails and following in his way. It is out of this act of humility – his baptism in the really, frankly, dirty Jordan River – as Jesus prays that he is named and God's declaration of love, God's new Israel now through this one so named is God's naming supreme accountability. It is God's surprise, God's visit upon the world in a response to those who might be pompous and powerful or cruel.

So there is nothing more important for any of us than to hear God call our name. What Jesus received by birthright we believe, we are invited to receive by grace. And so we hope and pray it might be.

The story is told of a poor, unmarried young mother struggling to raise what was then called – in those days – her illegitimate son in the back woods of a town in the hill country of Kentucky. I believe the place was called Mossy Creek. Society was not so accepting of children born out of wedlock in those days. And in poverty, even worse. Like the mother, the son was subjected to much ridicule and lived a life of profound and routine embarrassment, day after day, what we would call bullying today. One week, the Sawdust Trail circuit preacher came to town and began revivals in the local church. Each night the pews were crowded, and the service ended with an invitation to change one's life: to walk down the aisle and claim a new life. The boy would always leave before the

final hymn was finished and people were done singing so as not to be identified or called out and to avoid further embarrassment.

On one occasion, the preacher left the front of the sanctuary early and made his way down the aisle, and the preacher and the boy met face to face halfway down the aisle. And in a bombastic voice he calls out, "What is your name, son? Who's your father?" And after an eternity of silent embarrassment, the preacher finally said, "Oh, I know you. I can see the resemblance. You're a child of God."

And, as the story goes, there was a child raised by a faithful, single mother in the backwoods of the hills of Kentucky who rose to a position of great influence and considerable accomplishment as a two-term governor of the state of Kentucky.

So beyond any efforts at self improvement and beyond even the best of resolutions and the best execution of our resolutions, we are named and loved by the same spirit of the living God that opened the heavens over the River Jordan at baptism. In fact, our own baptism becomes a reminder of that great power and that living and loving force which we are to carry into life as we are given opportunity day by day. Greater than any position of entitlement and able to overcome any circumstances of impoverishment, the same spirit calls to you and me saying, "You are mine, you're named, you are loved, and there is nothing you can do to change that." Amen.

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