Generation names

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As anthropologists have shown us, cohesive communities usually have narratives, traditions, and symbols that have shaped their collective psyches and have powerfully bound them together. These traditional practices make up their thought world, and when a person is displaced from that world, it makes less sense to carry on the practices.

My father grew up in a clan society in pre-Korean War North Korea. His grandfather was head of the Shin clan. Had the war not taken place, had the Communists not confiscated all privately owned land, and had my father not been displaced by the war and separated from his family and village, he would likely have been responsible for deciding which traditional practices to carry on and which to discard.

The war and all the resulting devastation and displacement did take place, however, and so it came to pass that, in leaving behind his village, my father also left behind nearly all of the traditions that he would have inherited. It just doesn't make sense to carry everything from one place to the next.

One thing that had been carried over generations was the practice of giving each new generation of children the generation name predetermined by the elders of the clan. Written into the clan's genealogical book were all the generation names. For example, the generation name of my father's generation was "Chol." The name he was given was "Un-Chol," and his younger brother's name was "Chang-Chol."

When my older sister and I were born, he and my mother decided to diverge from this generational practice. Instead of giving us names that we would have shared with our cousins living in North Korea, they determined that our new life in America should be signified by new generational names. In the spirit of beginning anew, they gave us the generation name “Mi,” taken from “Mi-guk,” the Korean word for “America.” Built into this choice was not just the decision to begin anew, but also the decision to begin planting the roots of our identity in the relationships and responsibilities that would grow in a new place, a new land.

In Isaiah 43, the prophet speaks to a people who have known devastation, displacement, and loss. Finally free to return home, the ground beneath them shifts yet again. It is in the midst of this dramatic shift that the prophet calls out to them: “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. . . I have called you by name, you are mine.” Who we are is constituted by whose we are. We are constituted by others’ claims on us--and by God’s, and, by extension, all of humanity’s.

Generation after generation, the church passes along this claim in its age-old practice of baptism. When I speak the words of baptism--“You are a child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever”--I know that I am voicing God’s claim upon each person, a claim of relationship and responsibility to all people.