

Called by God's name: Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the Lectionary

December 29, 2009

If the political movements of the second half of the 20th century taught us anything, it was that names matter. It matters that a mature African-American male be addressed as “Mr.” or “Sir” and not as “Boy.” It matters that a married woman be free to choose the surname by which she will be known. It matters, because names are more than labels. They express social status and the interrelationship between speaker and addressee. They are freighted with whole worlds of history and culture.

If this is so in the 21st century, it was all the more true in the Bible. Most famous, perhaps, is the scene at the burning bush in Exodus 3, where God comes as close as ever to explaining the Name that would eventually be considered so sacred that Israel would say only “the Lord.” Today’s lessons, however, focus not so much on the meaning of the name of God as on the significance of bearing that name as God’s gift and as a token of the relationship one has with that God.

Today’s first lesson, for example, speaks to Israel at the lowest point in its existence, the Babylonian exile. At best, this turn of events seemed an expression of God’s judgment on Israel’s apostasy; at worst, it appeared that Israel’s God was defeated at the hands of Marduk of Babylon. In any event, the future looked dicey for Isaiah’s audience. He responds to the situation, however, with a series of audacious claims asserting that God is very much alive and well and is dedicated to the restoration of God’s people. The present situation may look like the end of the world, but whether Israel passes through fire or water (think Robert Frost’s poem “Fire and Ice”), God will see its people through.

Why? Because “I have called you by name, you are mine.” As promised long ago at Sinai, “Indeed the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6). Therefore (cf. Amos 9:7), God asserts that entire wealthy foreign nations are a fair trade for his downtrodden and scattered people—“everyone who is called by my name.”

It is the second lesson that wades fearlessly into the early church's most controversial move, a radical reinterpretation of Isaiah's "everyone who is called by name" in a literally ecumenical direction. There had been multiple antecedents, including Isaiah's postexilic vision of the nations streaming to worship the Lord at Jerusalem (Isa. 60). In the New Testament, Jesus asserted that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24), but his final words before his ascension read: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Now it is happening. The news reaches the apostles that Samaritans are accepting the gospel and are being marked with the name of Jesus in baptism. Peter and John investigate and confirm the genuineness of this expansion of God's people with their own hands laid on the newly named, to which (or even by which) God responds with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the gospel Jesus himself is named (or at least commissioned) and receives the Holy Spirit. The voice from heaven combines two earlier passages, "You are my Son" (Ps. 2:7) and "with whom I am well pleased" (Isa. 42:1), juxtaposing a royal psalm from a coronation with the first of the servant songs in exilic Isaiah. God thereby affirms that Jesus is a very particular kind of messiah; as Harry Wendt said, this is a "king who does feet."

To be sure, John the Baptizer's words warn us that this servant messiah is no weakling: "I baptize you with water. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Water can drown, and water can cleanse and vivify. Fire can burn, and fire can thaw and purify. But just as it was for exiled Israel, so it is for those baptized in the name of Jesus: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; . . . when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isa. 43:2).

The English language still speaks of christening as the act of naming. These days it is often applied to inanimate objects like ships, but from the first it was a synonym for baptism, that act by which one is marked with the name of Christ. As a saying made famous by Carl Jung has it, "Called or not called, God is present." Those called by God's name may now reciprocate and call upon that name with confidence in God's faithfulness and the power and presence of the Spirit. We do this—as Chicagoans are wont to say in another context—early and often.