

Naming names: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the Lectionary

December 27, 2003

Rejoice, all who prepare weekly sermons. This is the year that Luke tells the story of Jesus' baptism. Luke makes less of repentance as the basis for baptism than do the other two synoptic writers; in fact, the word "baptism" occurs only twice in Luke's third chapter, and is not even included in this Sunday's reading. Thus a potential problem is avoided. If Jesus lived without sin, as Paul insisted, why did Jesus undergo a "baptism for repentance"? Some have encouraged the church to reopen this question. But not this Sunday.

There is a second reason for joy. The reading omits three verses that cloud the issue of who baptized Jesus. Luke tells of people coming to John for baptism, then describes (verses 18-20) the arrest of John. Luke places the baptism of Jesus afterward, without saying who performed the act. We are left with a scene that is strikingly simple. Jesus was baptized, probably along with others. As Luke recounts the narrative, Jesus was praying when a physical being lit on him "like a dove" and a voice announced that Jesus had found favor with God.

Luke, then, sees the baptism of Jesus as a setting apart. Jesus was called by a unique name: the beloved Son of God. With the name came a mission. But without the emphasis on sin and repentance, the reader is left with another dangling issue: Why are Jesus' followers baptized?

Isaiah provides the threads by which Jesus and his followers are held together in the baptismal fabric. The prophet speaks for the Divine: "I have called you by name, you are mine." Placed in this context, all baptisms are a setting apart. Baptisms set us apart *in particular*. They also set us apart *in kind*.

Names are the first means by which we are set apart, and baptism is a naming ceremony. This aspect of the rite has received little attention in recent times, when sonograms tell parents the sex of their offspring weeks prior to birth, and a name is attached before the umbilical cord is severed. By the time the child is brought to the altar his name is familiar to family and friends.

We make an admirable effort to pretend otherwise. Before the act of baptism, we refer to “this child” or “these children.” Then comes the numinous moment when the church, through a local pastor, takes the child into its arms and asks, “By what name shall we baptize this child?” The parents respond with their chosen name. Only afterward does the liturgy allow the use of the child’s name. Religiously, if not practically, that which had no name has been given a name.

In our tradition, names are more than convenient tags by which we summon our offspring to dinner. Our names distinguish us from family and friends. They offer us the grace of individualization—not to be confused with the sin of individualism.

Names participate in the object that is named. Thus the Decalogue teaches us to use the name of God with caution and respect. So, also, with people. One of the saddest sentences in our language says, “My good name has been sullied.” Besmirching me and besmirching my name is the same act.

Names are sacred words by which we are individualized. Jesus, in baptism, received a new name. So do his followers.

Baptism also sets each of us apart as a particular kind of person—one owned by God. Those who have been baptized are called to live out the meaning of this remarkable reality. The unbaptized also belong to God, but they have had no public opportunity to announce and celebrate that fact; thus they are apt to feel no motivation to act on its implications.

Isaiah makes his point with such sparse, penetrating language that we are likely to miss its revolutionary nature. The idea that we belong to God is one of the most countercultural concepts abroad.

Multiple forces will attempt to redefine the child after she leaves the baptismal font. Commercial messages will attempt to convince her that she is owned by a great economic machine whose purpose is to make her a voracious consumer. Other voices will tell children that they belong to no one but themselves, that individualism is the supreme god. Government will attempt in myriad ways to establish its ultimate claim on our progeny.

Reinforcing the message of baptism should be the central task of the church. Yet churches often fail to confront the materialism of our consumption-obsessed society. Churches not only fail to challenge but often reinforce the deadly individualism that

permeates Western culture. I am staggered by the ease with which the church yields its young men and women to Caesar to become cannon fodder in whatever adventures or misadventures Caesar contrives.

Those who have been baptized will be touched, but not controlled, by many forces. Some consumption is necessary. Individualization is a requirement of psychic development. Some persons will choose to be part of the military. The imprint of baptism, however, transcends all this.

Those who know that they are owned by God recognize that their primary identity is not as cogs in the economic machine. They acknowledge they cannot thrive on their strength alone. They realize they are not born to be sinew in the government's military muscle. The baptism service has taught them who they are and whose they are.

Why was Jesus baptized? He was baptized so the Divine could set him apart—could call him by name and claim him as God's own. And that is why we are baptized.