

Names can have a lot of power. When we are born, names are often the first gift we are given. We have nothing in the world, no power, no wealth, no possessions, but then we are given a name—something that will belong to us for the rest of our lives. Even if we change our name, that first name will still be a part of our history.

Names are reflections of our identity, of our culture, and of our values. You share names, especially, last names, with people who come out of a similar culture. Your name might reflect a greater trend in society, when every other kid in your class had the same one. I grew up with more Katies and Ashleys than I was able to keep track of! Your name might even be one you chose as an adult, to better reflect who you understand yourself to be.

Names tell us to whom we belong. Shared family names carry weight. For those of you who have gotten married, or chosen to change your last name for your partner, I'm sure your original family name still has significance, as you celebrate traditions that came from the "Jones" side of the family or the recipe that you had every Christmas Day growing up in the "Smith" household.

Names are funny things because they both reinforce our ties and connections to others, all while keeping us independent. Our last names bind us together. Our first names assert our individuality. Names serve a lot of different purposes. Names have power.

Being *called* by our name is even more powerful. Sometimes it's a silly thing: picking up our coffee at the Starbucks counter, or *finally* being called back to the doctor's exam room after a long wait. There is great stock placed on being called the right name or the wrong name. Being called the right name feels good, feels right, feels validating. Being called the *wrong* name, however, can be frustrating, upsetting, or even feel dismissive.

What name we are called tells us who knows us well and who is a stranger. When telemarketers call and ask for "Rebecca Ajar," I know immediately that they do not know me. And that doesn't even scratch the surface of nicknames or pet names, the names that are only reserved for certain people. Do you have a name that only one or two other people use? It's a special feeling, isn't it, knowing that you have this relationship that is unique and important and valuable.

Our family knows our name, or names—the things we are called by and known as. Our friends know. Our coworkers, our acquaintances that we see occasionally as we go about our lives. All of these people know us and know our name...at least one of our names. ...and so does God. God knows every name we have...and *calls us by it*.

We heard from the forty-second chapter of Isaiah this morning, but in the next chapter, God says something remarkable. "Thus says the LORD," says the Prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”
(Isaiah 43:1-2)

“I have called you by name, you are mine.” What beautiful words from the mouth of God! God, the incredible creator of the entire universe, is telling us, in no uncertain terms, that we are loved and we are God’s. We belong to God and God has given us a tangible sign of that love and belonging—God has given us baptism.

This morning we celebrate and commemorate the baptism of our Lord. Jesus, after his birth, after his presentation at the temple, after the wisemen have left, after his family fled to Egypt and returned, after growing up and becoming an adult in Nazareth, Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, along with everyone else waiting along the banks.

Jesus’ was baptized, and it’s *like* our baptism, but it is not the same. It is instead an *inaugural* event. It is the *first* baptism in a new kind of baptism. John’s baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. He proclaims that the one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Later, Jesus tells his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus’ baptism is not to forgive his sins. It is instead a sign. As the Holy Spirit comes down from above, the voice of God is heard: “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus’ baptism tells us who Jesus is, just as our baptisms tell us who *we* are.

In our own baptisms, we are claimed and named by God. We are joined to Christ in the waters of baptism. We are joined to Christ, we have died to sin and been risen to new life. We have been given a new identity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is almost as if the sky opened again, for each one of us, and the Holy Spirit descended and the voice of God spoke again from the prophet Isaiah: “I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Do you remember the day you were baptized? Do you ever think about it? I was an infant, only about two weeks old when I was baptized. I don’t remember anything, except what I’ve seen in pictures of my Lutheran pastor Grandpa Schmitt holding me in front of a font in Hobbs, New Mexico. Is it any different for you? Were you baptized as an infant? As a teenager? As an adult? Were you baptized in a church or in the ocean like a friend of mine from high school? Was your family there and supportive or were you instead only surrounded by friends from your church community?

Truth be told, we’re not always great at remembering and recognizing our true baptismal identity in our daily life. It doesn’t really matter how the baptism happened. We believe in *one* baptism for the Christian church and believe, along with most other Christians, that any baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, regardless of denomination is holy and true. I think, however, that we could do a better job of remembering that baptism is a life-long journey and vocation. It is not a one-time event so much as it is a *starting point* for our life in Christ and Christian community.

How can we live this way? Maybe starting by marking yourself with the cross when you pray or when you are feeling discouraged. Use that sign of the cross to remind yourself that you are a child of God. Martin Luther suggested that in the morning, as you wash yourself, you can splash around with the water a bit, reminding yourself of the water splashed on you in your baptism. As you encounter people with whom you disagree, as things happen that upset you or as you get frustrated or angry with people in or outside the church take a moment, stop, and think about your baptism and how they are a child of God as well. Think about how you are joined together with them in Christ and perhaps that will change the way you deal with that conflict.

Let's take a minute and remember our baptism together. When we baptize, we make the sign of the cross on a person's forehead. Look at the person next to you. If you're sitting alone, you might need to shift a little bit to find a partner. Everyone have someone? Good.

Here's what you're going to say: "[The Person's Name], child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." I'll repeat it: "[The Person's Name], child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." As you say it, trace a cross on the person's forehead.

How do you feel? I hope you feel treasured and renewed. Baptism is incredible. It's remarkable and life changing. It never goes away—it is a constant. We are irrevocably changed and connected to one another and to God. There is nothing we can do about it. We are named. We are claimed. We loved. We are God's.

Amen.