



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Called by Name

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

January 10, 2010

Baptism of the Lord Sunday (Year C)

Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Today is a day to contemplate that age-old question—Who are you? I suspect that you have spent some time over the years pondering that question. Down deep, in the depth of your heart, who would you say you are?

Way back in my freshman year of college, in a political science class, I sat listening to a professor asking us that question. I was still nervous about the college experience, still trying to figure my way through the maze of new relationships and blossoming responsibility. It was a question I had been considering.

Now it was being asked by a political science professor, one who looked every bit the part. He was impeccably dressed, tall, and imposing. More than that, he was intimidating, not so much because of his demeanor, but by the conviction of what he said. And now, he was off philosophizing on the eternal question that consumes our thoughts: Who are you?

“If someone came into your room in the middle of the night,” the professor asked us, “and woke you up to ask you that question, and you stammer out your name: I’m John Leggett, and then you’re questioner says, ‘No, beyond that, much deeper than that. Who are you?’, then the answer we all must give or the country is in trouble is this: I am an American.”

Makes sense, doesn’t it? To a political science professor teaching at a state university in Texas, the most important—the only name—he could give to describe us is that of American. “Who are you,” he asks. “American” is your answer. And we believed him.

Who are you? There are yet more answers out there. Advertisers and stores tell us that we are basically consumers, that our purpose on earth is to make and spend money. And, by all indications, we believe them.

Others try to get us to define ourselves by where we live, or how we make our living, or by the relationships that we are in—whether neighbors or spouses or parents or children.

Do you see what’s happening? This question—who are you?—is not just your question. Sure, you ask it of yourself. But others look at you and ask the same thing—who is she? Who is he really? And they are more than happy to provide you with an answer that defines you in the way that shapes you in the direction they want you to be shaped.

I remember an article in *The Tennessean* during the days when the University of Tennessee won the national championship, many years ago now. A wide receiver by the name of Peerless Prince was one of the most important members of that team. The reporter asked him about his name—Peerless. He said something like this: “My mother named me “Peerless,” and I’ve spent my whole life trying to live up to that name.”

Names, you see, don’t simply name us. They also describe us; they tell something about who we are.

In his book *Craddock Stories*, the wonderful preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. As he tells the story, a strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I’m from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me. Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone. In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the minister. He looked closely at my face.... 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said, 'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.' I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

And so Dr. Craddock asked him, "What's your name?"

He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper." And Craddock then remembered how the people of Tennessee elected that same Ben Hooper to be their governor—twice.

So what name do you go by? American? Consumer? The black sheep of the family? Employee?

Amid all the voices calling to us and seeking to name us, comes another voice: You are my child. That's your name. That's who you are. You are my child.

The voice belongs to God. On this day when we remember and celebrate Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, when we hear again the voice from heaven describing Jesus, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," we can gain a sense of our own identity, and more than that, of what that identity means for our living.

You are my child, and I love you. It's been said that much of the chaos in the world today stems from the fact that so many people have never heard these words, "You are my beloved child."

In baptism, the church reminds us that not only do we hear those words, they become our new name, our grounding identity. The church has said this so strongly in its past that we used to give you a new name at baptism—your baptized name. Most often the church would give the name of some favorite saint of the area, hoping that the child would, like Peerless, spend a lifetime living up to the name.

Most often today the church doesn't change the name at baptism. But, in a sense, we are called to a deeper understanding of how we answer the question, who am I? It cuts below the surface name to our deeper identity—I am a child of God.

In just a few moments, we reaffirm our baptismal covenant, and we will hear again, "You are my beloved child. I have called you by name, and you are mine."

It's a time to sense the weight of some long-forgotten hands tracing the cross on your forehead, reminding you that "you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."

Later, if someone were to storm into our rooms and demand to know, who are you, I hope that we will answer from the depth of our hearts—I am a child of God.

In the waters of baptism, we are given a new name—child of God—and we hear again the deep and abiding truth: God loves us and will never let us go. May all that we do throughout this and all our days, be done out of that truth of who we are.