

What's in a Name?©

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

January 13, 2013

Dr. Sharlyn Gates

Now that the Advent and Christmas Season is past it's back to regular life again, right? Actually, it doesn't look like the Christmas Season is over at our house. I've been busy and when I am home, I just don't want to start the job of putting everything away. Besides that, I'm still enjoying seeing those beautiful decorations you all gave us last year. They remind me of love – of gifts – which remind me of why we celebrate Christmas anyway – we have the gift of Jesus.

I will be taking down the tree this Monday on my day off and will put away all those ornaments with care and love and will get our home back into the normal everyday look. I told someone the other day, maybe I would just leave the tree up with the lights and take off the ornaments and hang red hearts on it for Valentines Day and then hang Easter eggs on it for Easter. Somehow it wouldn't have as much meaning, I don't think. Plus, it's really hard to dust a Christmas tree!

Okay, so with Christmas past and even the celebration of the Wise Men finding baby Jesus being over as well, what do we, in the church, celebrate and look for now? We are in-between Advent/Christmas/Epiphany Season and Lent, that is coming up very quickly. Our liturgical calendar we follow calls this "Ordinary Time."

Ordinary Time is not a bad time, it's *most* of the time in our lives. But some liturgical calendars call this the Season of Epiphany and, I think that is very much what it is.

Epiphany is the time for "seeing" in a different way. You know, those times when you might be looking at something you've seen before, but suddenly it is new, and different ... clearer, as if you had been looking through a foggy window, and it was wiped clean and now you can really see!

I think these Sunday's coming up will be Epiphanies for us as we hear about Jesus in ministry. An epiphany is a manifestation of something. And really, if you think about it, it is in those ordinary moments of our ordinary lives in ordinary times ... it is often then, when we are not looking, or expecting, that we suddenly have an epiphany ... an "ah hah" moment, as Shaun called it last week.

I've already mentioned the epiphany that the wise men had when they found little Jesus after studying and following the star. They were Gentiles, not Jews. It was an "ah hah" moment for them to "see clearly" who Jesus was. And maybe they really didn't ever quite grasp the truth of the Christ, but they saw he was special and was to be worshiped. For Gentiles to be the first among humans to seek and to find him was an amazing thing.

But, with all that said about the seasons in the church year, (and I do really love following those seasons), I find it a little difficult each year when we have to make the leap from the nativity that held the new born baby ... to the swirling, baptismal waters of the Jordan where the grown up Jesus entered in with all the other humans.

I've seen on Facebook where lots of people have sent messages to Shaun and Michele Hardimon, congratulating them on their beautiful new baby, and there are comments like "Enjoy every minute! They grow up way too fast."

It seems it really is true ... it feels like Jesus grew up way too fast! We don't have much information about him as a boy – except that one story when he stayed behind at the temple to talk to the Rabbi's and scared the living daylights out of his mom and dad when they realized they had traveled for a whole day without their son being with them. How does that happen, anyway?

But here is Jesus at 30, ready to start his ministry. And he goes into the waters of the Jordan River where crowds of people have already been confessing their sins and being washed clean in the waters of baptism.

And the first thing many of us wonder is "why?" Why would the Son of God need to be baptized anyway? If he was without sin, as the Scriptures tell us, then why enter into a baptism of repentance of sin, which is what we are told is the baptism John the Baptist was doing?

I think John the Baptist actually gives us a hint as we look for the answer. John himself said to the people as they were wondering if he, John, was the Messiah:

"No," he says, "I baptize you with water, but there is one coming who is more powerful than I, who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" ... and then he adds "and with fire" too.

Sounds ... kind of scary. What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit? And what does he do with the fire?

It's one thing to repent of sin and be washed with water, but how will I be baptized with fire?

Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's look at Jesus ... whose name means ... "one who saves." Jesus, whom the angels said would be called "Emmanuel" ... which means "God is with us." Jesus ... the one John, the gospel writer, called "The Word" ... that was in the beginning and that nothing ever existed without him.

This is the Word that became Flesh and lived among humans. The Son of God ... God incarnate ... who became one of us, so much so that he enters into the very waters where our sins mingle together and wash over his human flesh ... flesh that would be killed for those very sins.

And after Jesus was baptized, Luke tells us that as Jesus was praying, the Holy Spirit came down and hovered over him in the form of a dove and the voice of God affirmed what the angels had proclaimed at Jesus' birth ... "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am very pleased."

This is not the beginning of Jesus being God's Son, but it is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This is the beginning of the power of God being manifested through Jesus, the Christ. (*Christ* is the same word as *Messiah*, which means "the anointed one of God.")

Jesus relates to, and becomes one with, the people as he enters those baptismal waters. But Jesus also is now the one who has the power to actually forgive those sins that have been confessed.

He is filled with the Holy Spirit and he empowers us with that same Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God that burns away the old and makes way for the new.

Growing up on a little ranch on the Oklahoma prairie, it was an ordinary sight to go outside in an evening in the spring and see, on every horizon around us, fires burning off the old grass so that the new could spring up.

It was frightening sometimes. And there were times when my dad would be burning and it would get out of control and he would put out a call for all of us to jump in and help. We would get old gunnysacks and wet them down and beat that fire until it was back under control.

I think of that when I hear John say, "he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire." He burns off the old so that the new can grow.

When you think about it ... it's not always easy to walk into those waters of baptism. The scripture story makes it sound quiet and fairly calm. But if you think back over history, those saints who went before us ... who walked through those waters and went through the fires of Holy Spirit empowering, burning away your sins baptism, ...well, they didn't have it so easy.

In fact, ordinary time for them wasn't always so ordinary. It became extraordinary as they found themselves burning sometimes, not by the Holy Spirit, but in the flames of persecution. They found themselves riding the high waves of rough, rough waters. They found sorrow, and violence and pain and loss.

But they knew that Jesus, the Savior, the anointed one of God, had entered into their very ordinary lives by entering into the waters of baptism. And that as he obediently did that act, he was empowered, and because he was, so were they. And they could stand firm in the faith they proclaimed because they knew they were forgiven and freed and that nothing, no nothing, not even death could separate them from the Love and the power of God.

Isaiah's beautiful words, as God spoke to the people ... and continues to speak through the years to us all ... take on a new and powerful meaning as we hear those words of assurance and love and affirmation:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When 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.” He promised that to Jesus, and he promises it to us, as well.

As a minister, I have presided over probably 100 plus funerals in the 16 years I've been ordained, and even two years before that, as a student pastor. Four of those funerals have been in that last 3 weeks. The liturgy is always on my mind ... always in my heart. I can honestly say that it is because of the privilege of being a minister for people in that time of grief, that my faith is what is today. That, and serving as a chaplain in a trauma hospital.

Thinking through what I believe about God in relationship to our suffering is something I've done a lot of. It means more to me than I can ever tell you to know that God understands the pain of sin and suffering and death. God came to know it firsthand in His Son, Jesus.

Our faith in God and our baptism into the faith does not mean that we will not have pain and grief. It means exactly what Isaiah tells us. “When we pass through the waters, when go through the flames,” God is with us.

It means that what the angels said ... that he is Emmanuel ... God with us ... is true ... that whatever we go through, we are never alone.

It means that the name Jesus is the best name ever ... because he is the one who saves. We have our sins, not just washed away with water, but burned away forever with new ground ready for growth. It means that in his death and resurrection, the power of God in the Holy Spirit raises us up from death to new life as well. Again, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

His name is Jesus ... one who saves.

His name is Emmanuel ... God with us.

His name is the Word ... that existed from the beginning and that became one of us.

What's in a name?

When we are baptized, the minister asks, what is your child's Christian, or given name? Or, what is your Christian or given name? We only say our first and middle name, not our last name, symbolizing that we all belong to one family, the Christian family that belongs to God.

At the funeral service, in the prayers we say a word of thanks for the one who has gone on ... calling that person's first name ... their Christian name ... and proclaiming that in death, their baptism is now complete.

We follow Christ Jesus into the waters of baptism and into our ordinary lives where we turn a corner and suddenly we have an epiphany ... for there he is! We get into trouble but he is with us. We have sorrow, but we are comforted. We are afraid, but he gives us courage. We are confused but he gives us insight and guidance.

We are dying ... but he is there to give us new life.

God said to Jesus ... You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

And God says to us ... ⁴Because you, my sons and daughters, are precious in my sight, and honored, I love you, I would give anything for you. ⁵Don't be afraid, because I am with you... ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made are mine."

What's in a name? In our baptism, we take on the name of one who follows Jesus ... God's beloved Son ... and we too, become His child.

© Copyright 2013. All Rights Reserved.