

The Feast of the Lord's Baptism  
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*As for Jesus, So for Us*

When Daniel and I were in the adoption process and were waiting to be matched with our future child, we spent a lot of time thinking about the name we would give her. Because we had over three years of waiting we came up with many names and changed our minds numerous times. From the beginning, however, both of us had agreed that we wanted our child to have family names. We wanted her to know that even though she was not our flesh and blood she was part of the Barr and Richards families. She belonged to us. Weeks before Daniel was to travel to China we settled on a name: Margaret Curren Zhen. Margaret-named after my paternal grandmother, Curren-Daniel's mother's maiden name and Zhen-one of her Chinese names which means faithfulness. Not only did we want her to have our names, but we wanted to keep one of her given, Chinese names to remind her of her heritage and to instill in her a pride of where she came from.

Names are powerful. They convey something about our story and about our identity. They declare that we belong to someone and that we matter. A story, I heard told by a Methodist pastor illustrates the power of names. The story goes like this: On the first day of a retreat this pastor was leading for other clergy, she asked each member of the group to consider a name or story from Scripture which reflected his or her own journey. At the end of the retreat each would share it with the group. When the time came for this exercise, the retreat leader invited the pastors to sit in a circle, while the individual sharing sat in a chair in

the midst of the entire group. She said it was powerful to hear the names being pronounced and the biblical stories shared.

A pastor, fairly new to ministry, rose and took the seat. He remained silent for quite a long period while the group waited and waited for him to say something. Finally he spoke up and said that for three days he had looked for his name in the pages of Scripture, but what kept coming to him was the name that had been given to him by his Father since his birth. The retreat leader asked him if he wanted to share his name with the group. The young man quietly said, "My name has always been - *Not good enough.*" The others sat there stunned while he commenced to sobbing. As if guided by the Spirit, the retreat leader said that a few of the group rose at the same time and placed their hands on this weeping man's shoulders. Then together they offered a blessing upon him with these words, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." Later, she asked the young man if the words had made any difference at all. He responded that he didn't know. He did however realize that the broken place inside of him seemed no longer there. He knew that from now on when he would dip his hands in the baptismal waters and name a child before his congregation and God, he would also remember who he was.

These compelling words which washed over the young pastor's brokenness as a balm of healing and blessing are the same ones voiced as the heavens opened up at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. As Clarence Jordan puts it: "the sky split, the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove came down upon him and a voice came from the sky saying, 'You are my dear Son; I'm proud of you.'" This moment and these words not only inaugurated Jesus' call to public ministry, but they declared once and for all God's unabashed love for his Son and for all of humanity.

Standing in that muddy river, being baptized by his cousin John, Jesus redefined our humanity. No longer could anyone claim that humanity was hopeless and worthless or that our God was a distant and indifferent deity. As the Rev. John Stendahl writes, "the calling of Jesus . . . is not a word of mission, sending him into the future. Not at the outset. The word of baptism is first of all about the delight of God in this beloved, this chosen, this child called by name. Not a call to do, but a calling that names. As for Jesus, so for us. Our first calling, the baptismal call, is the one that simply loves and names: *You are my child. I delight in you.* The words embrace us and promise to hold us. This is where it begins, and this is also, we dare claim, the last word, the one that holds our future."

In a few moments we will renew our own baptismal promises that for many of us were first made on behalf of us by our parents and godparents. This day we remember our own baptismal call, the call that declared each and every one of us as being so completely loved and so delighted in that we were anointed by the Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. May we truly embrace this call of ours: this call that forever redefines us in our humanity. And when we find that the only audible voices are the ones calling us by names that hurt and exclude and leave us broken and ashamed, may the name given to Jesus at his baptism, the same one which was echoed at our baptisms restore our sense of who we are and whose we are. May not one of you, not one of us, ever forget it is in this name that our true identity as God's most precious children is conveyed. "*You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased,*" a voice called out from the heavens. As for Jesus, so for us.