

Somebody's calling my name: Sunday, January 7

*Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22*

In the Lectionary

December 20, 2000

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Memorial, was explaining to a TV interviewer why her remarkable work has come to have such a strong grip upon the emotions of the American people. "It's the names," she said, "the names *are* the memorial. No edifice or structure can bring people to mind as powerfully as their names." She is right, and that's why I'm ashamed of how poorly I remember other people's names. I am also saddened that in this digital age we are as likely to be asked for our numbers as for our names.

God doesn't substitute numbers for names. "I have called you by your name, you are mine." In this Isaiah passage, the fact that God has named Israel makes all the difference. It is a guarantee of so much. It reminds Israel's people of their divine origin, of being created and formed by Yahweh. It banishes fear and announces redemption. It offers God's protecting hand in fire and flood. God woos Israel with a declaration of covenant love and confesses that Israel is "precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you." In scripture, being called by one's name is a rich gift.

These promises and great privileges, however, come with a claim of ownership. Yahweh goes on to remind Israel that the name it bears is Yahweh's name. The Lord speaks of bringing back from north, south, east and west "every one who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

It's a little like carrying both a given name and a family name. The first makes me special because I'm me. The second tells me I'm not only me; it reminds me of a heritage I carry with me. In Africa, ancestor veneration is a deeply spiritual acknowledgment of this accountability. People are concerned with not offending the integrity of their "old ones"—the names of their forebears.

Names tell us we are loved and call us into accountability. What greater accountability can there be than to know that we are called by God's name, created for God's glory?

Names play another role in scripture. Some who claimed the biblical equivalent of celebrity become little more than historical markers for the real players.

Luke opens his third chapter with a quiet irony. After a roll call of the celebrities of his day—Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate; Herod, prince of Galilee; Philip, prince of Ituraea and Trachonitis—he drily informs us that “the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Not to those with the pompous titles, but to a wanderer in the wilderness. The difference was that his name was God-bestowed, with an angel promise that this John would be great in the eyes of the Lord (Luke 1:15).

In an MTV world of dreary “celebrities” whose only claim to fame is their inability to keep their clothes on or their excesses of boorish crudeness, it is important to remember that God has another list, chosen not for celebrity rating, but for faithfulness to God's great enterprise of healing the world.

Some of those Bible-day “celebrities” were angered that the word of the Lord had gone in John's direction. Herod was particularly irritated by John's denunciations of his love life, and finally imprisoned and killed John. Today, however, Herod is only the punctuation mark, while John's ragged figure is scripture's signpost to Jesus, the center of human history.

So here Jesus is, standing in the water with the crowd who press in from the Jordan banks for baptism. It's been 20 years since he engaged the teachers in the Jerusalem temple. The last we knew, he was growing up in the home of Joseph and Mary. Now he begins his public ministry, and it opens with a humble baptism that identifies him deeply with the people he has come to redeem. What could bind him more closely than to wade into the muddy Jordan with people weeping for their sins, quietly urging the hesitant Baptist to wash him too?

It is out of this act of utmost humility that Epiphany comes. As Jesus prays, heaven's glory opens and God's Spirit-dove descends upon him. Suddenly, all those first inklings of vocation that stirred in childhood, the unshaped consciousness of call, the inner yearnings and searchings, are brought into sharp focus. And Yahweh names him with the name only he may bear: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am

well pleased.”

This affirmation is the defining moment for the Nazarene. It is God’s declaration of love to God’s new Israel; it is God’s naming to supreme accountability; it is God’s surprise, visited upon the world of the pompous and powerful.

There is nothing more important for any of us than to hear God call our name. What Jesus received by right, we are invited to receive by grace.

In the office of a United Methodist bishop in Ohio, there is a fountain where water runs down the face of a smooth granite slab. Visitors are invited to place their hands on the slab, let the water stream over their fingers and meditate on the words carved into that slab, “Remember your baptism, and be thankful.” Until we know we are made, loved and claimed by God as God’s children, we have nothing to offer this world that it cannot offer us. The remembrance of our baptism is our own, small epiphany.