

“I Have Called You by Name”

Rev. Chris Glaser

Virginia Highland Church – Atlanta, Georgia

Baptism of the Lord – January 10, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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What was the “epiphany” of last Sunday’s scriptures?

The universalism of God—the children of Israel’s national deity is not their God alone, but the God of all nations, of Gentiles and Jews, of all creatures, of the entire universe.

The “aha” or epiphany of today’s scriptures is the particularity of God—that this universal God nonetheless relates to us personally, calling us by name, choosing a people, and blessing each and everyone of us with our own piece of divine spirit.

Okay, so now we can go home. Just kidding.

Let’s pray...

My less charitable thoughts as I reflected on our scriptures for this Sunday were about how many in my profession might this morning preach on John the Baptist’s dire warning, “[The Messiah’s] 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, if I were to practice *lectio divina* with our Gospel lesson—in other words, if I were to choose a phrase that leapt out at me and meditate on it—it would be this scary “but”: “but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

I was raised in a hellfire and brimstone kind of church and, when I read this phrase or hear it read, I immediately think that’s me, “the chaff that God will burn with unquenchable fire,” because that was what I was used to hearing growing up. But thank God for my progressive side that immediately corrects, saying, “No, this is a metaphor John the Baptist is using. ‘Chaff’ isn’t referring to you or to anybody in particular. ‘Chaff’ is referring to everything in your life that covers up the kernel of wheat, the soul, inside.” This was a common practice, tossing the wheat into the air with a winnowing fork so that the chaff blew away and the kernels of wheat fell to the threshing floor.

Now, I can hear one of my childhood Baptist preachers correcting me, saying I cannot interpret the Bible metaphorically—that I must take the Bible literally. But, no longer a child to be bullied, I would retort that to read this text as if the chaff were bad people and the kernels of wheat were good people is itself to interpret this text metaphorically, because all John is saying is that chaff and wheat will be separated, one saved and the other burned. If taken literally, John is merely talking about wheat production! So no one really reads the Bible literally—all interpret what we read, it's just that we each choose different interpretations of biblical metaphors.

This is important as we look at any biblical text, but seems particularly important as we read the texts for this Sunday. All the texts deal with chosenness, that God chooses individuals—Jacob, Israel, Jesus—or that God chooses communities—the people of Israel, the Body of Christ, the church. And I believe we get into trouble if we read this “chosenness” too literally.

Isaiah reads, “But now thus says the Lord, the One who created you, O Jacob, the One who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

The Gospel of Luke tells us, “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.’”

So Jacob and Israel have been called by God by name, and Jesus has been called by God a son, the beloved.

Again, Isaiah declares God speaking, “Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, ‘Give them up,’ and to the south, ‘Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’”

Last Sunday I talked about how Isaiah is celebrating the return of the exiles to Jerusalem after the Babylonians who forced them into exile were defeated by Cyrus of Persia. The early church echoed this saying of Isaiah when during their Communion liturgy they declared, “People will come from east and west and north and south to sit at table in the kingdom of God.”

So Jews became the chosen people, and Christians became the “called out” ones—the meaning of the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*—the called out ones.

To accomplish a task, it's important to feel chosen or called, but if taken too literally, it may come to imply that you have been chosen or called to the exclusion of others and tempt an individual or a community to think of themselves more highly than they ought.

When I was a kid, I was always the last one chosen for any team in gym class. When I was an adult, my call to serve in ministry was not recognized by Presbyterians because of my sexual identity. So I know—as do many of you—what it means to be excluded.

Many individuals feel themselves to be chosen or called to the exclusion of others. They take their achievements or their prosperity or their privilege or their opportunities **literally** as signs of God's favor. This is even preached from some pulpits.

Those who take the chosenness of Israel by God literally may become unquestioning supporters of Israel as a nation. That puts them at odds with Palestinians, Muslims, and Arab nations.

Christians who take their own calling literally as God's people to the exclusion of others may become unquestioning supporters of the Bible or the church as infallible. That puts them at odds with Christians having different views, scientists and historians, people of other faiths, and non-believers.

What happens in such cases is that literalists forget the epiphany of last week: the universalism of God. If God is universally the God of all peoples, and all creatures, and the entire universe—then all of us are chosen, all of us are called, just in different ways. Jacob and Israel are simply the firstborn of the people of Israel. Jesus is simply the firstborn of the called out ones, the church. Jews are, as Isaiah says in another context, a light to the nations. Christians are, as Jesus says in another context, a light for the world. Both lights are to bear witness to the universalism of God.

That particular individuals or particular communities are chosen or called by God is called by liberation theology “the scandal of particularity.”

Why was a nomadic Middle Eastern tribe of shepherds who wandered the land given this extraordinary experience of the presence of God in the wilderness, in liberation, on Mt. Sinai, in the Promised Land, in returning from exile? Well, as Thomas Cahill claims in his book, *The Gift of the Jews*, it was to give the world monotheism, a belief in a single God who is nonetheless the God of all.

And why was a first century Palestinian Jewish male named Jesus granted this extraordinary experience of Holy Spirit descending like a dove and a voice from heaven saying, “You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Well, if we are to believe the Gospels, especially the mystical Gospel of John, it was so that we might all share in that Spirit and all hear “You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Now, if I were to follow Thomas Cahill’s lead in writing *The Gift of the Jews* and write a book about the The Gift of the Baptists, I would say that the gift of the Baptists is that they taught me to take the Gospel personally.

And if I were to write a book about The Gift of the United Church of Christ, or of progressive Christianity, I would say that the gift of the UCC and progressive Christianity is that they teach me to apply the Gospel universally. But I have to say it’s harder for liberal Christians to take the Gospel personally because we often cringe at sentimentality or subjective experience.

In selecting hymns for the funeral of a Presbyterian pastor with whom I worked, his former organist told me she knew which hymn not to pick. Apparently he absolutely hated “In the Garden,” she said. You know how it goes:

I come to the garden alone,
 While the dew is still on the roses,
 And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
 The Son of God discloses.
 And he walks with me and he talks with me,
 And he tells me I am his own.
 And the joy we share as we tarry there
 None other has ever known.

I love this old song. I love its intimate love and mystical communion with Jesus. But, in good humor, the organist brought me back into the reality of the pastor’s intellectually muscular faith. Tender and sweet as he was himself, he disliked the “me and Jesus” sentimentality of the song. “If he was late starting the worship service,” the organist explained mischievously, “I would just segue from the prelude into that hymn, and he’d be lickety-split in the chancel ready to begin.”

Now I myself had a mischievous thought as I pondered both passages from Luke and Acts about how everyone was to be baptized, not just with water, but also with the Holy Spirit. Giving the Holy Spirit to each and every one of us was just asking for trouble! We only have to look at our heritage as Baptists to understand this, or witness a Parish Council meeting.

Many of us, when we hear “Holy Spirit” think of wild exhibitions of religiosity and fervor. But if Holy Spirit is as gentle as a dove, as gentle as the snow that fell on Atlanta overnight Thursday, it may simply be the gentle epiphany that we are each personally loved by God. It may simply be Wesley’s notion of “a heart strangely warmed.” The scholar Benedicta Ward has suggested that “the ultimate block within [us is] that deep and cold conviction that [we] cannot love or be loved” (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p 166).

I think I’ve told you before that toward the very end of her life, in her 84th year, my mother, a fundamentalist Baptist all of her life, told me she had always believed that God loved humanity universally, but had never realized that God loved her personally until then, the last year of her life. Perhaps this is Holy Spirit growing in us during our lifetime. Perhaps this is the true scandal of particularity, that God loves each of us in particular, warts and all. This is amazing stuff.

God loves you Matthew. God loves you Blanche. God loves you Gladys. God loves you Jeff. God loves each and every one of you. Receive the Holy Spirit!