

**“Named and Claimed”**  
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**The Congregational Church of Hollis**  
**Baptism of Christ, Year C**  
**Isaiah 43:1-7**  
**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Who are you? Where do you belong? What makes you worthy—deserving of consideration or respect or effort?

These fundamental questions of identity and purpose, these interrogations of selfhood, generally loom large first when we’re adolescents—when we’re “coming of age”, making that transition from the innocence of childhood into the maturity that adulthood expects of us.

But the questions don’t just present themselves once, when we’re teenagers. They revisit us periodically across our lives, especially when we’re in times of transition or crisis: when the rug is pulled out from beneath us—when we lose a job, or a loved one. It’s time to retire, or we hit another milestone birthday.

The identity concerns also surface when a major catastrophe happens close enough to home that it affects us personally: natural disaster. Terrorist attack. The imminent threat of war.

Occasionally, it’s just a random afternoon and they suddenly realize they’re deeply unhappy in their current situation—whether their job, or their marriage, or the circles of people with whom they most frequently associate.

If we don’t have a clear sense of who we are, where we belong, or what gives us a sense of worth and well-being, these moments are devastating. And, depending on how we cope, our response can manifest a sort of chaos that draws everyone around us into the maelstrom.

Isaiah, speaking to the Israelite people who were going through a major identity crisis, offers words of grounding, clarifying reassurance. Let’s recall the story: Israel had been bruised and bloodied, conquered, and dispersed by the Babylonians. They were in exile and doing everything they could to hold onto a sense of who they were as God’s chosen people, despite being thin on the ground, scattered far and wide.

They read their humiliation and subjugation to the Babylonians as punishment for their arrogance and disobedience in relation to God—if not their own, personally, then certainly that of their political and religious leaders. It’s pretty safe to guess that many of them had begun to suspect that, although they’d previously understood themselves to be God’s chosen people, another nation had claimed first position in God’s heart.

In Chapter 42, just preceding our reading this morning, Isaiah had chastens the Israelite people for completely disregarding divine teaching. He accuses them of seeing many things, but not really observing them; of hearing many things, but not actually listening. They're the sighted-blind, and the hearing deaf, the wretched ones who think they're lost, but only because they've ignored God's directions. These are people in need of amazing grace.

And Isaiah's poetic words to the beleaguered people in the midst of their identity crisis deliver that needed grace. He reminds them of their story as a people. He hearkened them back to the narrative that was meant to guide their self-understanding, as well as their understanding of God's interaction with them. He takes them right back to the beginning: to the creation: "But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isa. 43:1)

Next, he evokes the imagery of water. In the first sentence of the Bible, Genesis 1:1—at the beginning of the Beginning—it suggests that "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Let's be clear: while water is necessary for human survival, it can claim life just as surely as it can save it.

From the very first verse in the Bible, water is symbolic of chaos and threat at least as often as it symbolizes the bringing forth of new life. And, new life often *does* feel threatening and chaotic, doesn't it? We may not represent it that way explicitly very often, but the truth of it is evident in our responses to change and reformation.

Isaiah's image of water is followed up by the equally powerful, equally life-giving and life-threatening, image of fire.

Getting more specific about when and why the people should not fear, God's word to the beleaguered people is one of reassurance. Here's what he said: "When 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" (Isa. 43:2a).

These words had an historic ring to the ears of the exiles—Isaiah was taking them back to one of their core narratives. God had been with them already, generations earlier, through the waters of the Reed Sea as they escaped from slavery and Pharaoh's minions; and again, after 40 years of wilderness living, when they crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. God had made a path. This promise being made was not foreign to them. Nor was the promise of a non-consuming fire: hadn't Moses stood before a bush and watched it burn without being consumed?<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Valerie Bridgeman Davis, NIB, p. 223, paraphrased.

Where are there chaotic waters mounting or swirling in *your* life? Or in ours as a community, or nation? What's the fire that threatens to consume, today?

By returning to the Israelite faithful to the story that guided and shaped their understanding of life, and God, and relationship with each other, Isaiah was re-establishing the people in their identity; reminding them who they were, where they belonged, and why they were of sacred worth. Human beings tend to be forgetful, especially when it comes to the ways that God has acted in the past.

As we heard in several of our readings across the Advent season, Isaiah not only reminded the Israelites about their past—he shared God's promise for their future. They could expect a Messiah, one who would save them from their wretched state.

*Messiah* (mah-SHEE-ach) is the Hebrew word that translates into Greek as *Khristos*. (Greek was the dominant language of the New Testament writers, which is why *Christos* rather than *Messiah* became the dominant title used for Jesus.) In English, we say Christ. All three words mean: "anointed one." Individuals were anointed—that is to say, they were rubbed or smeared with oil—when they had been singled out as having a holy or divine purpose. Saul, for example, was anointed by Samuel to become the King over Israel; and after him, David.

As we celebrated a couple of weeks ago, Jesus—the one anointed by God for the purpose of salvation—arrived in the world under the reign of King Herod, born into a world that neither recognized him nor had room for him. According to Matthew's gospel account, the newborn and his family lived as refugees for a time, but they eventually returned to the Palestinian region of Galilee. When he was grown, we're told by Luke, Matthew, and Mark that he went out to where John the Baptizer was preaching, and asked to be baptized by him.

John baptized people by immersing them in the Jordan River—the same river God had allowed the Israelites to pass through so many generations before, as they made entry into the land God had promised to them. This was part of their story! It must have been quite a powerful and moving experience, especially because those who approached John would have been thinking about their identity, who they were, where they belonged, and where they'd been deriving their sense of worth and esteem in the world.

Many—maybe even most—of them would have come to John wanting to break with a past they'd discovered gave little meaning, depth, or purpose to their days. Immersion in the water marked a renunciation of the familiar but broken and selfish ways of their past, and an intentional new beginning. They came in search of salvation from a life that didn't satisfy.

As the one being baptized emerged from the river, gasping for air and dripping with the potential for new life, their past symbolically flowed downstream—no longer claiming authority over them—and they were completely empowered to lean into their new way of

being. Their baptism symbolized the way in which they were intentionally allowing God, by the work of the Holy Spirit, to fashion them into a completely new being.

Now, here comes Jesus—the one about whom John has been preaching as he goes about his baptizing. The more powerful one who would baptize—not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire. According to Luke’s account, John baptizes Jesus and as the anointed one is 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.’” (Luke 3:21b-22)

It’s impossible to reconstruct exactly what happened in that moment, but this much is clear: he was named, and he was claimed. Jesus’ identity was revealed: he was claimed as God’s Son, named as the Beloved—with whom God was well pleased.

As Old Testament professor Kathleen O’Connor writes, “All the divine promises articulated by Isaiah receive a new layer of meaning in Jesus’ baptism. In that ... event, Jesus passes through the waters and comes fully to his identity. He becomes the ransom for many. He brings new life for people lost to enslavement. He reveals God’s love for the people—for *ALL people*—the new Israel, gathered anew from the four corners of the earth for the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Here’s the good news for you and me: regardless of how broken or wretched or lost or imprisoned we may feel we are, when we are baptized into the name and family of Jesus Christ—when we become Christians—we too, will pass through the waters like the Israelites in the exodus, and like the captives in Babylon, and we will know new life on the other side. When we go through the waters of chaos, or are tested by the fires of life, we are not alone; God is with us, and we shall not be consumed. Like Jesus, we are named—we are the Beloved, and claimed—we are Sons and Daughters of God, with whom God is pleased; pleased enough, in fact, to become one of us. The story of Jesus Christ—what went before him and all that happens because of him—his story becomes our story, and in him we find our true identity, belonging, and purpose. Thanks and glory be to God! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, NIB p. 223.