

## FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 12, 2020

“Named, Claimed, Accompanied” (*Isaiah 43:1-5a*)

It was during a retreat. Our facilitator suggested that for this guided meditation, we find a partner. She began to read from Isaiah, my favourite book in the Bible with all its evocative imagery and poetry, its wonderful words of comfort and challenge. It was this morning’s passage, the work of Second Isaiah. This prophet is speaking in God’s name to the Hebrew people in exile in Babylon - men and women who have been defeated in war, whose nation state has ceased to exist and who are in danger of losing their language and culture, their religion and traditions. In the eyes of the world, they are nothings, nobodies. But not in the eyes of God.

To make sure we heard this message, our facilitator had us read the verses to one another, inserting the name of our companion after each “you”. “But now, thus says the Lord, the One who created you - *[insert couple of names]*. The One who formed you - *[insert couple of names]*.” “I have called you by name - *[insert couple of names]*.” I had read these verses many times. I had shared them with people in the hospital and with families and friends at funerals. And yet, they had never addressed me so clearly, so compellingly.

Names are important. Our Hebrew forebears appreciated this. They gave careful consideration to the naming of a baby so that the name would reflect something of who this child would become. For instance, Isaiah means “God is salvation” - what a perfect fit for a prophet! In Hebrew tradition, if a person’s life was turned around, if something significant happened, they might be given a new name. Thus Jacob - meaning “supplanter”, referring to his taking his elder

brother's birthright - becomes, after his night wrestling match, Israel, the one who contends with God. Simon, the fisher, is renamed Peter, the Rock. Saul, the persecutor of the church, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Our own names may not be as layered with meaning, but they are usually the product of some thought. We may have been named after someone - a relative, an actor, a singer, a figure in the Bible or on the world stage. Our name may have been chosen because of the way it sounds or rolls off the tongue when coupled with the surname. Our name may be invented by parents to reflect our uniqueness. However our name was chosen, it becomes a part of us. When we are asked: "who are you?", our first response is normally: "I am [name]."

To have our name taken away is a terrible dehumanizing act. In the musical, "Les Miserables", Jean Val Jean is transformed into number 24601 after he steals bread to feed his family. In ***The Book of Negroes***, the child Aminata Diallo who is kidnapped from her home in Africa is renamed Meena Dee by her slave master in America. In Margaret Atwood's ***A Handmaid's Tale***, June Osborne loses here individuality and independence when those in authority in Gilead turn her into Offred, the handmaid of a Commander named Fred. Leaving the world of fiction, in World War II, Jews arriving in concentration camps were stripped of their clothes and belongings, and tattooed with a number. They were no longer human beings with names but just numbers to be assigned arbitrarily to a work party or sent to the gas chambers. In our own twenty-first century, some 3,000 Syrian refugees came to Canada with exit visas from Turkey where their Arabic names were transliterated using Turkish pronunciation and spelling. Other

Syrians had their names mangled by officials in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. As a result, the names on Canadian identity documents are often not the ones their holders would prefer. Members of the same family may have slightly different names. Requests for name changes abound.

Our names matter. There's this scene in season two of ***The Handmaid's Tale***. In a supermarket. Offred leans over to another handmaid to whisper: "my name is June." She responds: "I'm Emily." This starts a veritable wave around the entire store, a wave of energy and joy. The guardians still stand there with their weapons and their threat of violence. The handmaids' situation has not changed: they will still have to return to the commander to whom they are assigned. But they have reclaimed their individuality, their personhood.

"I have called you by name." God knows us not as number 24601, not as an occupation or member of a certain ethnic group or class, but as individuals with a name. "You are mine." God claims us as God's own, not as a buyer takes ownership of a slave or a warden asserts authority over an inmate. That kind of claiming fills us with dread, and makes us feel small and powerless. God's claiming is more like when we go to see a litter of puppies or kittens. We may have said to ourselves: "we are not coming home with one." But then a pup gambols over; its tongue licks our fingers; its soulful eyes look into ours. The kitten reaches out a paw; purrs as we stroke its fur. And our hearts melt. We are claimed: we are their person. Or we are visiting a family. We may never have met their three or four year old, but he brings us a toy; she starts a conversation. And

then, unbidden, and for reasons unknown, they decide to take our hand to show us their play room. We are claimed.

God claims us as God's own. We live in a world where many voices would tell us who and whose we are: a tax payer whose hard earned money needs to be protected / a consumer who must acquire the latest in goods and gadgets; a retiree entering the golden year / a young person who should be enjoying the best time in their lives; a refugee fortunate to find room in a makeshift camp / a citizen with all the rights and privileges; a homeless person bouncing from shelter to shelter / a resident in an upscale gated community with high tech security systems. In a world where some of us are led to believe we are nobodies, we do not matter, we do not count, God declares: "you are mine....You are precious in my sight and honoured and I love you." As Jesus at his baptism hears a voice from heaven declare: "this is the Beloved" so God claims each and every one of us as beloved daughters and sons. At one time, I had a poster in my office portraying a little child with the caption: "I know I am somebody because God don't make no junk." That was a message the preacher and civil rights activist, Martin Luther King Jr., consistently conveyed. He told the crowds: "You are somebody. You have dignity. You have worth. Don't let anybody make you feel like a nobody."

Named and claimed, we can face each day with confidence. All the more so because God promises to be with us. I am old enough to remember when the United Church's New creed was first introduced. For someone who had only known "The Apostles' Creed", the opening line was striking: in place of "I believe

in God”, it was “we are not alone, we live in God’s world.” Instead of an individual declaring their faith, we were a community, standing together, affirming our trust in God - “in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.” Nothing, but nothing, can separate us from the love of God.

There will probably be times in our lives when it may seem as if we are passing through waters, as if we have been caught in a river in full flood. The familiar landmarks vanish. The fast moving currents catch us, propelling us along to we know not where. We fear we will be dragged under; we will be overwhelmed. That’s the way the Hebrew exiles feel. That’s the way you and I may feel when we lose someone we love or a cherished dream is shattered; when a sudden, unexpected health issue sends us from medical test to test, appointment to appointment or our company decides to downsize and our position is cut; when seemingly out of the blue, a spouse declares that the relationship is over or we discover that a family member has an addiction which could lead to their losing everything, even their life.

We may wish these situations could be avoided. We may long for someone to wave a magic wand to save us. God offers us neither exemption nor deliverance. What God does promise is to never abandon us. We know from experience that being accompanied can make all the difference in the world. An adult hand holding ours on the first day of kindergarten. A best friend walking in front when we venture into strange new territory. A family huddled together to hear the diagnosis and treatment plan for one of their members. People gathering for a vigil in memory of the people who died in the plane crash in

Tehran. Accompanied, we can find new strength and determination, courage and hope.

Today, we are invited to gather around this table because God calls us by name and claims us as God's own - beloved and precious. We come accompanied by God, and by our brothers and sisters in Christ. Thanks be to God.