

*Named and Claimed*  
*Isaiah 43:1-7, Eph. 3:14-19*  
*The Sacrament of Baptism for*  
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As I stood in line waiting to vote on Tuesday, I was struck by what an amazing thing it is that we get to choose our president and the others who govern us. We Americans are quite enamored of our right to choose for ourselves. Not only in elections but in all areas of life. We love our freedom of choice. We like to think that *we* determine the course of our lives. But the Bible tells a different story.

From Isaiah 43: God says to His people, "...I have summoned you by name; you are mine...you are precious and honored in my sight and...I love you."

Jer. 1:5: God says to the prophet Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart."

John 15:16: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you," Jesus says to His disciples.

Eph. 1:4 (NLT): "Even before He made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ..." Paul writes to the Christ-followers at Ephesus.

Long before we ever choose to love God and choose to follow Jesus as our Leader, God chooses us. And baptism – especially when we baptize a baby – baptism is a beautiful picture of that. Now, this is not just "getting the baby done." What we have witnessed here today in the sacrament of baptism flies in the face of our culture's supreme value for freedom of choice and self-determination. These children have received baptism today – not because they chose it for themselves, nor even because their parents chose it for them. These little ones have been baptized today because *God* chose. They have done nothing at all to earn or deserve God's love or attention: they don't yet believe in God, they haven't served on any church committees, or given any money. And God knows everything they will do – *everything* – to disobey Him and deny Him and disappoint Him over the course of their lives. But in the sacrament of baptism, God says to her/them: "I choose you. You belong to me." In the sacrament of baptism, God says, "This one's mine."

On the day of your baptism, that's what God said about you. For Christians, Election Day occurred before the foundation of the world. Before God created the sun or hung the moon in the sky, God chose *you*. Listen, this is what I really want to say to you today: If you count yourself among the people of God, if you call yourself 'Christian,' it is *not* primarily because you made a decision to follow Jesus. It is because God acted decisively to choose you and call you to Himself. Now, I know that it may *appear to you* that you chose God, but make no mistake: If you are a believer in Jesus Christ today – I'm not talking about being a Presbyterian, I'm talking about being a Christ-follower – if you are a follower of Jesus, it's because God chose you and called you – named you and claimed

you – *not* because *you* made a decision at some point. Oh, you need to make that decision, yes, but *your* decision is made only in response to what *God* has already done. God goes first.

Whether you were baptized as a baby or as an older child or an adult, it was not *primarily* your decision nor your parents' decision. I want to be very clear about that today. What we witness in the sacrament of baptism is a demonstration of God's grace, reaching out to choose His people. In baptism, we see and touch God's unmerited favor in calling us to belong to Him. God chooses us. We do not choose God – not first, anyway. You do not baptize yourself – someone else baptizes you. Baptism is something you *receive*, not something you *achieve*.

Before these children were born, I suspect that their parents spent a significant amount of time deciding – and maybe even arguing about – what to name them. Names are significant. When you choose your child's name, you stamp them for life. Names identify us and, in many ways, become our identity. In baptism, *your* name is placed in the company of *the* Name. We baptize “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” So it is as a baptized person that your primary identity is to be found. Baptism is not only about believing. It is also about belonging. Belonging to God. But more than that: belonging to the family of God. That's why when we baptize, it's not a private family-of-origin affair. For Christians in the Reformed tradition, baptism *always* takes place in the context of the community of faith. It's a communal, family-of-faith affair. We call that family-of-faith, ‘church.’

Someone once said this: “The world will ask you who you are. And if you do not know, the world will tell you.” Church, we just made a promise. We made a promise to tell Olivia who she is, to tell Jacob and Jackson who they are. When they ask, as they inevitably will, “Who am I?” it is our job to tell them: “You are a child of God. You are sealed with the Holy Spirit and so God lives in you. You belong to the people of God.” And when they ask, as they inevitably will, “Who is God?” we have promised to tell them. “God is your heavenly Father, God is the One who created you and loves you and calls you by name. God is Jesus, the One who is with you always by the Holy Spirit.” That's the promise we made today, the promise we make every time we baptize, whether we are baptizing a baby or an adult. Our job is to tell people who they are and to help people discover who God is and know Him personally. What a privilege! And what a challenge!

The trouble, you see, is that Olivia and Jacob and Jackson will have lots of other voices telling them who they are or who they *should* be. The world will tell them that they are what they do for a living. The world will tell Jackson that he is good if he is well-behaved and smart. That he is lovable if he is good-looking. The world will tell Jacob that he is successful if he makes a lot of money and can buy a lot of stuff, or if he is a really good hockey player. The world will tell Olivia that she is the most important person in her world and that it's all about her. And some of these things will get into their minds and into their hearts and they will begin to believe them. And once they get into their minds and hearts and they believe them, these things will seem like truth to them. And if these

precious ones don't know the truth about who they *really* are, they will begin to live according *that* truth. And they will become who the world has told them they are.

Norman Vincent Peale tells the story of being in India and, passing by a tattoo parlor, he stopped to look at the various designs one could choose to have tattooed on one's body. He noticed one that said, "Born to Lose." And so, curious, he went into the shop and asked the tattoo artist, "Does anybody actually ever get that tattoo 'Born to Lose?'" And the tattoo artist said, "Yes."

"Why would somebody want to have a tattoo that said, 'Born to Lose,'" Peale asked him. And in broken English, the tattoo artist said, "Tattoo on mind before tattoo on body." When we baptized these precious little ones today, I made the sign of the cross on their foreheads. A sort of an invisible 'tattoo,' if you will. I said, "\_\_\_\_\_, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." Tattoos are permanent, right? Not 'Born to Lose.' 'Born to Belong.' 'Born to Believe.' 'Born to Be Loved.' In baptism, they are named and claimed by the One who created them.

This is not only true for Olivia and Jacob and Jackson. This is true for all of us who are baptized. But you know, we forget. We forget who we really are because of our baptism, and we begin to believe we are who our world tells us we are. We believe that we are what we do, or that we are successful if we make a lot of money, or that we will be loved if we are beautiful the way the world defines beauty. Those are lies. But we believe them. I think that is in large part because we have forgotten the meaning of our baptism. Baptism is something that was done to us long ago, or something we decided to do at some point in our lives, but most of us do not live every day in wonder and gratitude for the fact that we are baptized. Not that you *were* baptized. You *are* baptized. It's not something that was done to you. It's who you are.

Listen: All you who are baptized – you are named and claimed by God. Still. No matter what you've done or not done. Because baptism is not about us, it's not about what we do. It's about what God has done and continues to do and *wants* to do in your life.

The Catholic church has a simple and beautiful way of helping folks remember that they are baptized and therefore that they are named and claimed by God. When you enter a Catholic church, you dip your fingers into a small bowl of water. And as you touch your finger to your head to make the sign of the cross, it is to remind you that you are baptized.

Now, God's initiative to name us and claim us in baptism does require a response on our part. In two weeks, we will have the great pleasure and privilege to witness six of our young people make their public professions of faith in Jesus. We call it 'confirmation.' On Confirmation Day, they will *confirm* the statements of faith in Jesus that were made on their behalf by their parents when they were baptized. On Confirmation Day they will say that the Christian faith is not just the faith of their parents nor even merely the faith of their church family, it's *their faith*, too.

God's choosing us *does* require a choice on our part: A choice to follow Jesus. If you need to make that decision, I pray that today would be the day: decide to claim the Name in which you were named and claimed on the day of your baptism. Commit or recommit yourselves today to live out the identity you received in baptism. Hear God say to you today: "I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name, you are mine." Decide *today* to live as the person you really are: A beloved child of God.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, the apostle Paul includes what I think is perhaps the most profoundly beautiful prayer in the New Testament. This is our prayer for those who were baptized today. It's not only the prayer of their parents and grandparents. It's our prayer – it's the church's prayer: [Eph. 3:14-19](#).

Eph. 3:18: "...may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide..." It is "together with all the saints" that we come to know the love of God, that we experience the dimensions of that love. The Christ-following life is not a do-it-yourself, self-help course in life. It takes place "together with all the saints." In the Bible, saints are never special holy dead people who have achieved some special holy status in the church. In the Bible, 'saints' are very simply those who believe in and follow Jesus. The 'saints' are all the members of the community of faith called 'church.' In the Bible, the saints are...us. Hmm... 'saints R us.' I like that.

We are not 'saints' because we are so saintly. We are saints – literally 'holy ones' – because God has named us and claimed us and set us apart to live as His very own people. In baptism, God has said to each of us, "I picked you out. I love you with an everlasting love. I have given you My Name. You belong to me." In baptism, God said to Olivia, and He said to you and He says to you today: "This one's mine."