

January 12, 2025 - "What's in a Name?"

Preacher: **Pastor Twyla**

Scripture: **Isaiah 43:1-7**

*<sup>1</sup> 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.  
<sup>2</sup> 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.  
<sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.  
Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;  
<sup>6</sup> 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—  
<sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made."*

A newspaper ad read: "Lost – One dog. Brown hair with several bald spots. Right leg broken due to auto accident. Rear left hip hurt. Right eye missing. Left ear bitten off in a dog fight. Answers to the name 'Lucky.'"

What's in a name? This is something to think about as we approach today's scripture lesson from Isaiah. This is my favorite scripture in the whole Bible. It was a God moment when this text was brought to my attention at a bible study I attended. It was during a time in my life when I was trying to figure some things out in my life. I was doing some deep soul searching. The power of this scripture hinges on the words we read at the end of verse one, "I have called you by name,." Everything that follows is put into perspective, taking on a fuller meaning.

Before I get ahead on myself, let's take a moment to consider who Isaiah was and his role in God's plan. "The prophet Isaiah, sent by God, to speak for God, to the people of Judah. "He slowly rose, and the crowd fell silent. Those at the back leaned forward, straining to hear. The atmosphere was electric. He spoke, and his carefully chosen words flew like swift arrows and found their mark. The great man, a spokesman for God, was warning, and condemning. The crowd became restless – shifting positions, clenching fists, and murmuring. Some agreed with

his message, nodding their heads, and weeping softly. But most were angry, and they began to shout back insults and threats. Such was the life of a prophet, who's purpose was to call the nation of Judah back to God and to tell of God's salvation through the Messiah." Gerhard von Rad, a German Lutheran Old Testament scholar, goes on to define the Old Testament prophet as one who "'participates in the emotions of God.'"

Just as the prophet's words called out to God's chosen and beloved, but lost people of Isaiah's day, the prophet's message cries out today to all who wander away from God. The prophet not only warns of bad things that will happen if the lost do not return to God, but he also continues to lay out before all people the emotions of God. Not all of God's people were listening. Not all people listen today either. In Isaiah 43, the prophet pleads with the people of Judah, and he pleads with the lost today to return to our God, because our God loves all people more than we could ever imagine.

Gerhard von Rad put great emphasis on the fact that the prophet tells us that God calls us by name. He said that God calling us by name may not seem like such a big deal, but it is. He challenged us to take a moment and really think about it, because when we do, we find that the verses that follow take on a richer and more personal meaning.

The fact that Isaiah tells Israel that God calls them by name should have reminded them that they were created by God, and they were special to God. God redeemed Israel and summoned them by name to be those who belong to him. The same, brothers and sisters, is true for us as Christians today.

Take a moment to think about it, when someone wants to talk to you, and they say your name, that person is expecting you to respond with your attention. They are not expecting anyone else to respond. Attached to your name then are your experiences, personality traits, values and beliefs, a whole history of all kinds of things associated with your name that have accumulated over the years of your life and molded you into who you alone are.

So, when someone says your name, they are not just saying a bunch of letters put together to make up a word that spells your name; they are actually speaking or talking to everything that makes you, you. They are acknowledging everything that makes you who you are. It can be a very personal acknowledgement if they know you well, and as we know, God knows you very well, better than you know yourself.

Jonathan, four, was trying to learn the Lord's Prayer. He learned by listening at church each Sunday. One Sunday as the congregation was praying the Lord's Prayer, he could be heard above all the others praying, "Our Father, who art in heaven, I know you know my name." God knows YOUR name.

It may take former NBA star and current sports TV commentator Edward Arnett Johnson a long time to get over the worst day of his life. After his NBA career ended, the six-foot-eight-inch basketball champ, who at the time was forty-seven, spent many years working with children, giving motivational speeches, and serving his community.

But in 2006, another former NBA star – six-foot-two-inch, fifty-one-year-old "Fast Eddie" Johnson – was arrested for sexual battery and burglary. Some reporters around the country picked up the story and mistakenly assumed Edward Johnson of Phoenix was the criminal. His phone started ringing off the hook. Neighbors, even friends, were quick to tell him how disappointed they were with him.

"The thing that disappointed me the most is some people were overzealous enough to think it was me and attack me with a ferocity I can't comprehend," Johnson said in a telephone interview from his home in Phoenix, "That's the part that didn't allow me to sleep at night."

That's the part that forced me to reach out to as many people as I could and say, 'Shame on you; that's not me.'

Eddie Johnson of Phoenix said his goal for the next several days was to get the word out about who he really is – and isn't.

I don't fault the other Eddie Johnson for having that name," said Johnson. "I think it's a great name. He just doesn't happen to be a great guy."

None of us will ever have a mistaken identity with God. God knows your name, and God calls you by name, it's very personal and intimate because God knows everything about you. When God thinks about us, there are particular concerns and specific emotions attached to God's thoughts. In Psalm 139 we can read one of David's songs written about God's intimately knowing us. Listen:

<sup>1</sup> *O Lord, You have searched me and known me.*

<sup>2</sup> *You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off.*

<sup>3</sup> *You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways.*

<sup>4</sup> *For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether.*

<sup>5</sup> *You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me.*

<sup>6</sup> *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it.*

<sup>7</sup> *Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?*

<sup>8</sup> *If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.*

<sup>9</sup> *I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,*

<sup>10</sup> *Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me.*

<sup>11</sup> *If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me;*

<sup>12</sup> *Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You.*

<sup>13</sup> *For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb.*

<sup>14</sup> *I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.*

David totally would have understood what Isaiah was saying. Some people would say that I am simply stating obvious things about God; but if that is true, then why are there people who do not care about what they do, who are willing to hurt others purposely, who are negligent to creation, who are indifferent to their creator God and our Holy Savior, Jesus. If everyone understood and cared, about what may seem so obvious, they would be humbled by God's presence, they would want to be obedient and pleasing to God. They would want to know him better, and they would want our Savior to walk by their side, and they would welcome the power of the Holy Spirit to fill them and guide them, and this world would be a much, much better place.

Every Christian is challenged every day to open their hearts to hear God call their name. We need that daily, because I believe that as we comprehend the depth of what it means to have God call us by name, then the verses that follow begin to take on more power to be filled with hope, and peace, and comfort. I believe we can gain a brighter perspective on life during trying times. I believe we experience joy more often in our lives.

The words the prophet spoke in verse two reminded God's chosen people of a significant experience of their ancestors, the time when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt and God parted the Red Sea, resulting in their escape from the army chasing them. It reminded them that God was there for them in the past and will be there for them again as they hope for freedom once more. This reminder supported the prophets cry to them that they should not be afraid.

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Likewise, God calls us by name and says to us, "Don't be afraid," when you get into things way over your head, when you get into deep waters and the dark side of life overwhelms you, because I am always with you, I will be there with you as you make the difficult journey alone, hold onto me for your security. God does this for you when you are blindsided by pain and troubles. And God does this for you even when you've made the decisions that got you into a mess in the first place. That's amazing! This gives us hope and the will to persevere in trying times.

God calls us by name and promises to help us when life seems to have brought us to a dead end of hopelessness. There are no dead ends in life if we know God. Even the end of life in this lifetime is not a dead end when we walk with Jesus, because God promises us eternal life with him.

In verse 3, the prophet's words speak of God's redemption, as demonstrated through the defeat of other nations, for his chosen people's freedom. As we read these words today, we can hear Isaiah tell us that God calls us by name and tells us that we don't need to be afraid...because even though we fail time after time, God redeems us. We experience this as we have confidence in the price paid for our sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There's just no way that we can experience the freedom and comfort that comes with God's redemption if we cannot embrace God's acceptance of us and his desire to eliminate anything that could stand in the way of having an intimate relationship with him.

Dennis Byrd was an up-and-coming defensive superstar for the New York Jets football team, who was expected to help turn the Jets around. But on November 29, 1992, when the Jets were playing the Chiefs, Byrd was about to sack the quarterback when he collided with a teammate. His spinal cord snapped.

He awoke in the middle of the night at Lenox Hospital in a halo brace, not knowing where he was, why he couldn't move, and what was happening. Suddenly, he went from dreaming of making it to the Pro Bowl to hoping that someday he could once more hold his daughter in his arms.

From a worldly perspective, Byrd was no longer able to reach his potential. But in God's eyes, Byrd was capable of more than sacking quarterbacks. As the world watched and listened, Byrd told the media that Christ was his source of comfort in his time of tragedy. The doctors said Byrd would likely never walk again, but Byrd said that with God's help, he would.

On opening day of the 1993 football season, less than a year after his spinal-cord injury, Byrd walked to the Middle of the Meadowlands Stadium while 75,000 fans cheered. The miracle in Byrd's life is not that he broke his neck and walked again. The miracle is that the injury that destroyed his career didn't destroy his life. Byrd heard God call his name. When all seemed lost, he fell into intimate, all-knowing, love of God; and he knew that meant that God would get him through the deep waters and the flames of the fires that were threatening to consume him. Life would be different, but with God's intimate help, he made peace with what happened, and he trusted God to take him a new direction and rebuild his life.

What an amazing God we have! God created us, knows everything about us, redeems us in spite of all of our failures and promises to be with us through the highest highs and deepest, darkest lows of life. Our God calls us by name and loves us more than we can ever possibly comprehend. Don't take this wonderful gift for granted. Stop, listen with your heart to hear God call you by name. Hear **God** say as he calls you by name, "**you** are mine, you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love **you**." It will make a huge difference in your life, if you accept and believe this about God. Amen.