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First Sunday of the Epiphany
January 13, 2019
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What is in a name? What is in your name? Where does your name come from?

My name is James. I am not entirely sure for whom I was named after. There are several cousins on both my mother’s and father’s side of the family named James, all of whom have now passed away. I’d like to think I am named for all of them.

The Christian name “James” comes from an English translation of the Greek name “Lak-o-bos,” which is a translation of the Hebrew name “Jacob,” who was the brother of Jesus.

I rather like that.

There is another Jacob who is at least as noteworthy. In the Hebrew Scriptures – or Old Testament as Christians call it – Jacob is the founding patriarch of the Hebrew nation. God appeared to Jacob and gave him the new name “Israel.”

The ancient nation of Israel is named for Jacob. I rather like that, too.

Our names say something about where we come from and our people. Our names might even say something about where we are going.

Our names shape us.

Who am I? Whose am I? Where do I belong? No matter our age, these questions never go away.

This morning we hear this beautiful passage from the prophet Isaiah, who wrestles with these questions. He begins with our names.

For Isaiah, all things come from God, even our names, for it is God who creates us, God who knows each of us by name, and God knows us better than we know ourselves.

“Thus says the Lord,” Isaiah proclaims, “I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Each of us is cherished by God for who we are now, and who we are in the act of becoming. We are God’s own beloved – each of us.

“Because,” Isaiah writes, “you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

The Book of Isaiah is the longest book in the Bible and also the most complicated. Scholars believe it was written in four stages beginning about 800 years before the time of Christ. It was edited and re-edited over several centuries.
The book is named for Isaiah ben Amoz – Isaiah, the son of Amoz. The name Isaiah means “the Lord saves.” We know little else about him.

The book can be read as an epic poem, and as such, it has been adapted for musical settings down through ages, perhaps most famously by Handel in his masterpiece, *Messiah.*

The oldest known manuscripts of the Bible are scrolls of Isaiah, found near the Dead Sea, commonly known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Isaiah is the most cited prophetic text by rabbis in Jewish tradition, particularly in support of economic and social justice, and the centrality of Jerusalem as the locus of Judaism.²

Take it slow when reading Isaiah. Drink it in deeply. One of the biblical commentaries I read this week suggests we read Isaiah contemplatively, pausing and pondering the words and phrases, and reading them over again for new insights.³

We do well to remember that the only scripture known by Jesus is the Hebrew scriptures. There is no New Testament. More than any other scripture, Jesus points to Isaiah over and over. Isaiah is his go-to book. If you want to understand Jesus fully, you must mine deeply the depths of Isaiah.

When Jesus enters the synagogue as a young man, it is to Isaiah that he turns to proclaim his mission on earth.

He opens the scroll of Isaiah and reads this: “To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.”⁴

Jesus closes the book, and will spend the rest of his earthly life making real these words of Isaiah – and challenging his followers to make these words real.

In the verses from Isaiah we hear this morning, Isaiah places his listeners inside the epic saga of creation, and the long journey – the Passover – of captive Israel from slavery and exile to restoration and redemption.

Writer W. Carter Lester, in a commentary on this passage, puts it this way: “The prophet speaks to a people bloodied, bruised and beleaguered.”⁵

The prophet brings to these bloodied, bruised and beleaguered people words of hope, courage and redemption from the Lord our God.

“Thus says the Lord,” Isaiah proclaims, “he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.”

The saga Isaiah tells is more than about a single nation long ago, but is truly about all people everywhere, in hard places and in hard times.

We, too, know something of this.

Isaiah proclaims that all will be made whole and healed because God loves and embraces all of creation.
Isaiah’s words echo the Old Testament book Genesis that proclaims, “God saw that it was good.”

The universal message of Isaiah is deeply embedded in the language of the prophet’s book. Isaiah uses both male and female Hebrew pronouns to describe God, which does not come through in the English translations.

“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.”

Isaiah’s words bring us to the banks of the River Jordan and the gospel lesson we hear today from Luke. In Luke’s passage, we hear how the people of Israel are filled with “expectation,” wondering if the messiah they hope will liberate them is in their midst.

They come to the River to be baptized, no doubt the voices of ancient prophets like Isaiah ringing in their ears – and ringing in their hearts.

Jesus comes to the river, too. When he walks into the waters to be baptized, Isaiah’s words are made real: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”

Sometimes people ask why Jesus needed to be baptized if he is the Son of God. But maybe that is not the best question.

The better question is whether we will take to heart our own baptism, and enter the waters with Jesus every day of our life.

By being baptized, Jesus shares with us in our baptism, and shares with us in our humanity. He shares our joys, our challenges, our sorrows, and walks with us into the hard places, and in the hard times. He is in the waters with us.

And by our baptism, we share the same waters he enters, and we enter into our relationship with Jesus, the Risen Christ who is deep within us.

This is a relationship not just of the mind, but a relationship of the heart.

It is never too soon, and never too late, to have this relationship of the heart. Our relationship to the Christ within us is open to us always, whether we are very young, or very old, or somewhere in between. Baptism marks us as Christ’s own forever.

In our baptism, we enter the same waters that ancient people entered as they escaped Egypt, the same waters of the Passover, the same waters as the people in the time of Jesus and all the those who came before us – the same living waters Isaiah declares will sustain us forever.

“When you pass through the waters,” Isaiah proclaims, “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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

AMEN
1 Genesis 36:9-10
2 The Jewish Study Bible, Second Edition, Jewish Publication Society, introduction to Isaiah, p. 763
3 Jewish Study Bible, p. 763.
5 Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, W. Carter Lester, commentary on Isaiah, p. 220
6 Genesis 1:25
7 Jewish Study Bible, p. 765-766