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Jesus' Baptism
Matthew 3:13-17
January 8, 2017

When my husband and I were expecting our firstborn, we found out a month before the due date that we were expecting a baby boy. The main concern for us was a "healthy" baby, but we had learned the sex of our child via sonogram angle that one glance left no doubt the baby was male. Kirk was a Naval Officer at that time and his ship was heading out for the month before the baby's due date. We had some baby names we'd bounced back and forth between us, but now there was a sense of urgency because the baby might have arrived before the ship returned. We went to dinner with the solemn intention to pick a name.

I leaned toward my family names, "George," "Reginald," "Sewell," and "Tierso," which is the masculine for Teresa. Kirk, being from Oklahoma liked straight-forward, simple names like "John," "James," or "Mark."

We knew that it had to be a name with one spelling, because Steffensen, although completely phonetic, is so confusing. Jeffrey/Geoffrey and Jonathan/Johnathan were out. We did a round and a bout over that meal, setting aside names because "I once worked with a loser named that," or "I dated a guy with that name one time," and even "I dated a loser-jerk by that name one time." We then came to Gregory.

We each had friends who had that name and they were all "good guys." We chose a family surname from my side for the middle name, "Morgan." Consulting our baby-name dictionary, it turned out that Gregory means, "he who waits," and Morgan means, "by the sea."

And wait by the sea he did, arriving a few days after Kirk's ship returned.

Names are important. We each have a story about how we came by our name. We each were named by our parents for their particular reasons – to honor an ancestor, to mark a special time, or to fit in with our generation. Names can mark a person for good or bad: Beyoncé and Oprah for unique success, Adolf and Manson aren't so popular anymore ... What life would you expect for Horace or Bertha? How about Desiree or Thor? Our names are just the beginning of how we perceive ourselves.

Our names are just the first point of our identity. We also identify ourselves by gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, education level, vocation, there are many ways we self-identify and many ways that society parcels us into many cubbyholes of identity. I believe the internet has allowed us to associate more readily with people in our various levels of identity – both as wonderful affirmation but also sometimes to horrifying effect.

I imagine the many people with rare diseases who have been able to form international communities to support one another. But we also know of skewed perceptions about self – people who have also formed communities to encourage one another in their beliefs about supremacy or terrorism. It has become common to hear that a "lone wolf" terrorist found connection to ISIS through the internet.

The internet seems to act as a magnifying glass for identity – the good can be lifted up, or the bad can be multiplied. It gives up power like never before to choose who we are in the world, like no other generation before us. We are the ones who can either turn an identity on or off, to magnify it or to hide it.

Last Sunday, when we celebrated the feast of the Holy Name, we lifted up the identity of an eight-day old baby in Bethlehem, named Jesus, which means, “God saves.”

This week we flash forward thirty years to another day in his life, the day he was baptized by his cousin John, in the Jordan River. St. Matthew tells us, “... when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matt 3:16b-17)

God pronounced a new identity upon Jesus: “My Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This moment had power and transformed what Jesus understood about himself. We know this moment had powerful meaning to Jesus because in the very next verse after our reading (4:1), Matthew records that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested. This happens only *after* he has been baptized and named.

Just a month ago, I was with a group of fellow pilgrims, standing at the edge of the Jordan River. Our guide had brought us to a spot off the beaten path, at a park the tourist busses don’t go to. It was just our group, the gently flowing waters, and our imaginations as we read this passage aloud. We stood in a semi-circle, facing the water. Father Tim, the priest from my presenting parish who led the trip, told us to each bring to mind our names. As he and I took half the group and went from person to person, we asked each, “What is your name?” and we anointed each person and repeated their name to them with the words, “remember your baptism and that you are a beloved child of God.”

It was a very powerful moment, and very emotional for some, to say their name – it’s as if we were each somehow offering our full selves to God in that moment.

Perhaps you might find time today to think about your name and how you came by it. How has it shaped you?

When we are baptized, we each take on a new identity – baptism is not just about washing away sins, although that is a big part of it. Even more importantly, in our baptism we take on Jesus as our identity – we each become God’s child and beloved.

This family name we receive in Baptism precedes and circumscribes all those other names and identities we might claim for ourselves or have placed upon us by others.

Names are powerful: they convey identity, purpose, authority, and more. *And we have been given an awesome family name.* We are God’s beloved children, and each time we witness a baptism, each time we are near water, each time we make the sign of the cross, we remember that name and are renewed in faith, hope and courage.

Amen.