

Baptism of Our Lord, Old Testament, Year C

DON'T FORGET YOUR NAMETAG

Isaiah 43:1-7

The Baptism of Our Lord

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

1But 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. 2When 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. 3For 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. 4Because 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. 5Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6I 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 – 7everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Diagnosis: Where Is Your Nametag?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Nameless

Nametags are important. Most churches have them because they do not want people to feel anonymous, disconnected, or alone. Relationships matter and not just in church. You do not have to be on a desert island to feel alone. Even a large crowd, if no one knows your name, can be a terribly lonely place.

You have moved into a new neighborhood, but you do not know anyone, not even the neighbor next door. You might as well be on a desert island. Then you hear a knock at the door. You open the door and standing there is a smiling lady holding a plate of fresh baked cookies. "Hello, my name is Sue. I'm your next door neighbor. Welcome to the neighborhood. What is your name?" Pleasantly surprised you do what you would never do with a stranger. You offer your name. Two strangers become neighbors and maybe even friends.

Names make community life possible. Without names at best, we are strangers. At worst, we are enemies.

The prophet speaks when Israel is in exile. Israel has lost everything. There was no temple, no king, no holy city and no sacred soil to call its own. Babylon had dragged Israel into exile for the expressed purpose that God's people be forgotten. Nameless, Israel would no longer exist.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Afraid

Without a nametag, no one speaks to you. Unnoticed and unacknowledged, it is as if you don't exist. It would seem that even God no longer notices. Afraid, you shrink and cower seeking to disappear into the back row where no one will notice, where even despair has become a place to hide. Or we choose the other alternative. Afraid of anonymity, we will "make a name" for ourselves no matter what, even if it comes at the expense of others.

The tattered history of Israel is littered with the corpses of those who stood in the way of kings and their cronies who sought to make a name for themselves. So is the tattered history of the world. So is the tattered history of our lives. Of course, lurking in the shadows of our ruthless climb to "make a name" for ourselves is our fear that God does not notice us. Maybe now God will.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Forgotten

Of course, God notices. That is the problem. To think that we can make a name for ourselves by getting God take notice, is the height of our foolish arrogance. Look where it got Israel: exile. Because Israel no longer trusted God, all the things that God had given as a sign of God's faithfulness (land, temple, the monarchy) were stripped away. All the things by which Israel could be remembered, God destroyed. Indeed, nameless and anonymous Israel would be forgotten not only by rivals and neighbors, but worst of all, forgotten by God.

The same fate awaits us as long as we foolishly believe that we can “make a name” for ourselves.

Prognosis: Remembering Your Nametag

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Name Tagged

The theme song of one of the most popular TV sitcoms of the 1980s, “Cheers,” reflects the hope that lurks in all of us: that we could all be in a place “Where everybody knows your name.” Therefore, social gatherings offer guests nametags so that “everyone will know your name” and no one will feel alone or left out. That hope is never fully realized.

However, God remembers just as God remembered Israel. The prophet claims, in spite of appearances to the contrary, that God remembers Israel’s name. God will not forget the nametag that he gave them. “I have called you by name; you are mine!” God had created them when he chose Abraham. God had redeemed them from bondage in Egypt. Now, God was going to do it again. At that moment, the great Persian King Cyrus was conquering Babylon and bringing that empire to its knees. Soon Persia would also conquer the nations of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba. Cyrus, God’s chosen one, would set Israel free and return Israel to its homeland. God would once again “make a name” for Israel.

The best is yet to come. The day is coming when God will gather

people from the four corners of the world and unite them into one people. No watery flood or burning desert would prevent God from uniting humanity. God would create a world “where everyone knows your name.” No one would be stranger. Everyone was a friend.

In today’s Gospel, Luke’s account of the Baptism of Jesus, God does the same. Just as God reminded the exiled Israelites that “I have called you by name; you are mine,” so also does God name Jesus at his Baptism. The promise given to Jesus would be under attack for the rest of Jesus’ life. Throughout his ministry all the way to the cross, Jesus would be constantly tempted to give up on the promise he received at his baptism. The good news is that he never did. God raised him from the dead.

Therefore, the same is true for us. At our Baptism, when water was poured and the words of God’s name were spoken, God offers us another fate. It was as if we were there with ancient Israel when the prophet promised on behalf of God, “I have called you by name. You are mine.” It was as if we were there in the Jordan River with the Baptist and the heavens opened and the voice said of us, “You are my beloved sons and daughters; with you I am well pleased.”

We received a new nametag. From now on, we are known as “Christians,” Christ-ians, the chosen ones, sons and daughters of God, princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God. God is our Father, Jesus is our brother and all the Christians on earth and in eternity are our family.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution): Confident

Sporting this new nametag, we no longer have to “make a name” for ourselves. No longer uncertain of who and whose we are, we are confident that Jesus’ future is also ours. When we breathe our last, we take comfort in the promise that we will not die alone. We die “with him.” Therefore, we will be raised “with him.”

We are Christ’s. God has called us by name. We are his. We can never lose that name to anyone or anything. God himself stands behind us. Regardless of winning or losing, regardless of whether we get the best deal or not, we will always be the gleam in his eye. No one can take this name from us. This name defines who we are . . . forever.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Gregarious

We can live our lives giving ourselves away as Jesus did. We do not need to hide in our anonymity afraid that someone will know us. Confident of our identity, we gregariously introduce ourselves to strangers, initiate conversations listening for the needs of a neighbor, and look for ways to care for the “other” without fear or worry—even to those whose language or culture or skin color is different from ours. Why? Because we know who we are. We remember our nametag!