

The Baptism of Our Lord
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What's Your Name?*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
January 13, 2019

What name do you answer to? I usually answer to “Father Cheng” or “Patrick” – but I will also answer to “Spike.” And why is that, you might ask? Well, I had short, spikey hair in the late 1980s, and so my close friends in college called me Spike. In fact, one of my friends on Facebook from that era still insists upon calling me “Father Spike” – which I find rather amusing.

I will also answer to my Chinese name. My birth name is *Zheng Shuxiang*, which sounds quite different than “Patrick S. Cheng.” *Zheng*, which is my family name, was transliterated by Western missionaries as “Cheng” in the 19th century. It means “solemn” or “serious.” *Shu*, which is my generational name, means “book.” That name is shared by all those in my generation – including my brother and all of my cousins on my father’s side. And *Xiang*, which is my personal name, means “lucky” or “auspicious.” So I guess you could say that I’m a solemn, lucky book. Not a bad name.

You, too, might answer to a number of different names. Your name at work might be different than what your family members or loved ones call you at home. And all of those names might differ from any nicknames that you had growing up – or that you might still have. There’s a lot of history in our names.

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany. Today is also known as the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. It is on this day that we commemorate Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan. It is also on this day that we commemorate Jesus’ naming as God’s “Beloved.”

In today’s gospel passage from Luke, we hear about John the Baptist’s ministry and the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his adult ministry. After Jesus is baptized, and while he is praying, the heavens open up. The Holy Spirit descends upon him “in bodily form like a dove.” And a voice from heaven says “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

As Fr. van Dooren noted last week, the word “Epiphany” comes from a Greek word – *epipháneia* – meaning “manifestation” or “appearance.” Our gospel passages during the season of Epiphany are about the manifestation, or appearance, of Jesus Christ to the world. All of these events reveal a truth about Jesus that hadn’t been recognized before.

* Copyright © 2019 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

For example, last Sunday, on the Feast of Epiphany itself, we heard about the star of Bethlehem, which revealed the newborn Messiah to the wise men. Next week, we will hear about Jesus' first miracle of turning water into wine, which revealed his divine nature to those at the Wedding at Cana. And the season of Epiphany culminates, right before Lent, with a reading about the Transfiguration, in which Jesus reveals his full divinity to Peter, James, and John.

But back to baptism. In today's gospel reading, we hear about the heavens opening up after Jesus' baptism, and he is revealed to those around him as God's son, the Beloved.

Now baptism is one of those things that everyone thinks that they understand. Everyone thinks that they understand baptism because they've seen it or experienced it themselves. It's sort of a self-evident thing, like gravity, or the sun rising and setting each day.

But if you stop and think about it, the theological meaning of baptism isn't very obvious at all. Yes, baptism is clearly foundational to the Christian faith. After all, the baptismal font is the very first thing that we see when we enter the nave. But if I asked several of you to describe what exactly is happening in baptism, I'm pretty sure that I would get several different answers.

So, how might we make sense of the various ways of thinking about baptism? One possibility, on this feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, might be to see how the story of Jesus' baptism can shed some light on our understanding of baptism.

Some of us, for example, might think of baptism as the washing away of original sin. Original sin is, of course, the punishment that Adam and Eve received for their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Original sin is passed on, from generation to generation. Sort of like a virus or a defective gene. And that's why, the theory goes, we all need baptism – even babies – to cleanse us from the effects of original sin.

But, then, why does *Jesus* need to be baptized? Certainly, the washing away of original sin makes sense for us. But *Jesus* was born of a virgin. The biological chain of original sin was broken with respect to him. As such, it's not clear why *Jesus* needs to be baptized, if baptism is simply about the washing away of original sin.

Others of us might think of baptism as a pledge of loyalty or a rite of initiation. In other words, baptism signifies a person's voluntary commitment to become a Christian and to follow Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior. Interestingly, the Latin word for sacrament, *sacramentum*, was originally used to describe the oath of loyalty that Roman soldiers took to the emperor.

This view of baptism – as a pledge of loyalty or a rite of initiation – is reinforced by the mysterious phrase in today's gospel reading about the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus "in bodily form like a dove." If you lived in the Roman Empire, that phrase would have immediately meant something to you. A new emperor was often chosen after a bird – usually an eagle – landed upon the candidate. It was a divine sign that the person was favored by the gods. (This practice of reading signs and omens was called "augury," and that's where the word "inauguration" comes from.)

By contrast, the dove landing upon Jesus was the manifestation – or epiphany – of a new kind of leader. Instead of being revealed through a bird of prey such as the eagle, our Messiah is revealed through the peaceful dove. Baptism is therefore an initiation into a new kind of kingdom that is led by a new kind of lord. One that is built upon love and not violence.

But, again, why does *Jesus* need to be baptized? It certainly makes sense for us to pledge our loyalty to Jesus. But who exactly would *Jesus* pledge his loyalty to? Isn't he already the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity? Again, it's not entirely clear why Jesus needs to be baptized.

For me, the key to the meaning of baptism has to do with the act of *naming*. According to scripture, Jesus has many names. Jesus of Nazareth. Yeshua. The Christ. The Messiah. The Logos. But "Beloved" is the name that God chooses to call Jesus by after his baptism. Through his baptism, Jesus is revealed to be God's "Beloved" – the one with whom God is well-pleased.

The good news is that Jesus is not the only one who receives the name of "Beloved." We, too, receive that name through our own baptisms. As I said at the beginning of my sermon, I will answer to Patrick, Spike, or *Shuxiang*. But the only name that ultimately matters for me is "Beloved." That's the name that I received from God at my baptism. And that's the name that you received at yours. We didn't receive this name out of merit or because of anything we did or didn't do. We received it solely out of God's grace and because of who we are – God's beloved children. Through our baptisms, God assures us: "I love you. And you are mine."

We live in unsettling times. Today is the 23rd day of the governmental shutdown, the longest such event in American history. The stock market has gone haywire. Many people are worried about where their next meal will come from. Others don't know how they will pay the rent at the end of the month. Civility in our public discourse seems to be at an all-time low. And animosity seems to be at an all-time high. It's a scary time, and it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

But we must remember that, despite all the unrest and uncertainty around us, one thing remains constant – our identity as God's beloved children. We can be secure in the knowledge that God loves us, and that we belong to God.

In just a few moments, we will renew our baptismal vows. These vows are a powerful reminder of our responsibilities as members of the Body of Christ: to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship; to resist evil; to proclaim the Good News; to seek and serve Christ in all; and to strive for justice and peace.

These vows are an important reminder of the name that each of us receives at baptism: God's "Beloved." When we know that we are loved, we are able to turn our attention away from ourselves and towards others. That is, we are freed to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The gospel hymn that we heard earlier in the mass – "You Are Mine" by David Hass – is one of my favorite hymns. In fact, I made a special request to Claudia to include it in this morning's liturgy. Thank you, Claudia!

To me, the hymn “You Are Mine” is a powerful reminder of how each of us is named as God’s “Beloved.” Through our baptisms, God tells each of us:

Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine.

“I love you and you are mine.” What name will *you* answer to?