

## POSSESSED BY GOD

Epiphany 2: Baptism of our Lord  
*Luke 3:15-17, 21-22, Isaiah 43:1-7*

God has a claim on you.

God has a claim on me.

I mean that in the same sense of early American pioneers,  
who ventured out into the wild west,  
into untamed wide-open land,  
and pounded a big stick in the ground . . .  
“staking their claim.”

That’s about all it took to own a piece of land back then.

If it was still unclaimed,  
and you were standing on it,  
then you could claim it,  
you could, at that moment, possess it,  
as first owner.

It was legally yours, and no one *else’s*.

If someone tried to take it from you,  
you had the right to defend it, to take it *back*.

God has that kind of claim on us.

God was the first to do so.

The pioneer claimant.

So God has complete and prior authority  
to name the land,  
to shape it,  
to develop it, or leave it alone,  
to build something on it, or to tear down,  
to dwell in it, or abandon it.

It’s completely up to God  
how God chooses to act on this claim.

But there is one problem with this analogy.

A *big* problem.

We are not just acreage.

We are not property to be used or discarded.

You and I and *all* humankind,  
are the crowning work of God’s creation.

God created us and chose us for a unique purpose.

God’s claim on us is a love claim.

God’s exclusive claim on us,  
is the right to relate to us in love.

And that, of course, puts God in a terribly awkward dilemma.

For that love to be fulfilled, it must be reciprocated.

Love is not complete, until it goes both directions.

So while God has an absolute and complete claim on our lives,

God *must* give us freedom.

God *must* allow us to choose.

For God to *benefit* from this love claim,

God must *let go* of the claim.

As I said last Sunday,

God is the Hound of Heaven who pursues us.

But it’s an empty chase, if we don’t also pursue God.

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But having heard the scripture readings this morning,

who would not want to pursue a relationship with such a God?

The prophet Isaiah gives us in today’s text,

one of the most overwhelmingly *tender* . . . *warm* . . . and *passionate*  
passages in the whole of scripture.

This is *God* talking,

the Almighty and Just and Righteous Creator,

speaking to his human creatures,

his lowly, fickle, frequently rebellious, often oblivious,  
sometimes downright mean and stupid, human creatures.

And God’s obvious and deep affection for the likes of us  
comes through with breathtaking power:

“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you . . .

he who formed you . . .

*Do not fear*, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

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

How could we *not*—when loved with such tender passion—  
how could we *not* love in return?  
How could we *not* gladly give ourselves over to such a lover?  
Okay, I’ll *tell* you.  
We have been born into, and have grown up in,  
and continue to be immersed in,  
a culture that trains us to be self-made and self-determined.  
It is a fundamental cultural virtue, to be “your own person.”  
I am supposed to aspire to be independent,  
*not* owned by anyone or anything.  
To call my own shots.  
To be my own boss.

I guess it’s not too surprising that people aren’t coming in droves,  
to give themselves over to a God who says, “You are *mine*.”  
We instinctively assume there is something wrong, or sinister,  
about one who would say, “You are *mine*.”  
We *don’t* seek to be possessed.  
We seek freedom.

But in *God*, you see, we can have it both ways.  
God has a rightful claim on us. We are possessed by God.  
But God, out of deep love and affection, also gives us freedom.

The *challenge* for each of us—  
and doing so will be the journey of our lifetime—  
the *challenge* is to learn how to lay down ourselves,  
without losing ourselves.  
to allow this divine possession,  
while becoming a more whole and a more free person  
in the process.

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I believe this is what was happening with Jesus at his baptism.  
After coming through what was probably a normal childhood,  
normal adolescence, and normal young adulthood,  
Jesus was now, finally, coming to terms with his identity.  
He was grasping who he was called to be,  
and what he was called to do.

Sometimes we say this baptism was Jesus’ ordination for ministry.  
Here, he was commissioned for service.  
That’s not really a *wrong* way to describe it.  
His work *was* ordained and commissioned by God,  
and after his baptism and a stint in the wilderness,  
he *did* launch his public work in a larger way.  
But it’s not the *best* way to describe it,  
and *certainly* not a complete description.

I don’t think Jesus’ baptism was *primarily*  
a commissioning for service.  
It was *primarily* a “christening,” a naming.  
Now, we Mennonites don’t baptize infants,  
so we don’t often use the language of christening.  
But in many long-standing religious traditions,  
baptizing and naming are two central actions of the priest  
in the ritual of “christening.”  
And in the Jewish tradition, for *boys* at least,  
naming and circumcising happened at the same time,  
on the eighth day after birth.

So you could say, what happened to Jesus in the Jordan River that day,  
was a sequel to what happened when he was eight days old,  
being held in the arms of his teenage mother—  
the day he was given the name “Jesus.”  
*That* day,  
even though baby boy Jesus had no clue what was going on,  
he was publicly named by his Jewish community,  
his identity was located within these people of faith.  
In that ritual the community was told, in effect,

“Here is one of your own. Care for him.”  
And the baby Jesus was told, in effect,  
“You are one of us. You belong here, with us.”

So Jesus’ baptism in the river Jordan was his *re*-christening.  
When Jesus rose out of the water,  
the dove descended and a voice from heaven named him.  
“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”  
The God who gave Jesus life made a pronouncement  
the began with two words “You are...!”  
Not, “you *shall*” or “you *should*” or “you *will*”  
which are words of duty, of ordination for service.  
But, “You are!”  
Words of identity. Words of naming, of christening.

In our culture, we don’t really think too much  
about the significance of being named.  
Names for babies come in and out of fashion.  
Sometimes, parents just like the ring of a certain name.  
Sometimes, a name comes from the family, a generation or two back.  
Sometimes, a name is chosen for what it means.

I’ve told you before that I’ve always been a bit envious  
of people who have names that mean,  
“Gift of God”  
“Strong one”  
“Son of righteousness.”  
My name means “lover of horses.”  
That one hasn’t really panned out.  
Oh, I *admire* horses.  
But I’ve *been* on one maybe 3 or 4 times in my life.

But you know, that doesn’t really matter.  
The real significance in being named was . . . *who* named me.  
I was named by David and Esther Kniss,  
of Sarasota, Florida.  
Two persons, out of their own free will,  
chose to love me, and take responsibility for me.  
They did that by naming me, and saying, in effect,

to me and to the world, “You are our son.  
We claim you.  
We have a stake in your life.  
Until you reach adulthood, as long as we are *responsible*,  
we will sacrifice our very selves for you.”  
And they *did*. And I am forever grateful.

You know, having the right, and responsibility, to name a child,  
is an awesome and powerful thing.  
I was blessed to have parents  
who fulfilled that responsibility with love and integrity.  
Not everyone *does*.

That’s really what it means in Isaiah 43,  
when God says with deep affection,  
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.”  
God gives us our name.  
God lays claim to our life.  
God has a stake in who we become.  
We belong to someone greater than ourselves.

And that’s what was happening, first and foremost,  
at Jesus’ baptism.  
God was declaring, to Jesus and to the world,  
“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”  
God was saying to all who would hear.  
I claim this man Jesus.  
He is mine, and I love him.  
No matter what he may do,  
or what people may do to him.  
I love him.  
I claim him.

In his baptism,  
I think Jesus came to understand,  
in a deeper way than ever before,  
who he was,  
who he was called to be,

and who he would yet become.  
On that crucial, pivotal day of baptism,  
Jesus was not given a to-do list, he was given a name.  
After that, his ministry happened  
*because* he accepted that name as his true identity,  
and didn't allow anything else to rob him of that identity,  
or to redefine him  
and make him into someone he was *not*.

And no sooner was he baptized,  
that his identity was put to the test,  
in his wilderness temptations.  
Remember the lines used by Satan, to get to him,  
“*If you are the Son of God . . .*”

Note . . .  
On his baptism, the voice from heaven said, “*You are . . .*”  
In the temptations right *after* that, a voice said, “*If you are . . .*”  
Interesting juxtaposition isn't it?

Jesus was able to withstand the temptation,  
because he had gotten clarity, in his baptism, about who he was.  
If only we *all* had that kind of clarity.  
If only we were not so confused, so often, about our core identity.  
If only the cultural values we swim in 24/7  
didn't do such a great job telling us lies  
that we are what we drive, or  
what we wear, or  
what we look like, or even,  
what we *do*.  
And we *believe* those lies.  
We make decisions based on those lies.  
More than we care to admit.

But the voice of God is a truth-telling voice.  
“I have redeemed you,” God says.  
“I have called you by name, you are mine.  
I am the LORD your God, and I will be with you.  
I love you.”

And that voice is *still* speaking love, and affection,  
and passion toward each of us, as God's good creation.  
God's voice is not silent.  
The question is whose voice am I tuning my ears to *listen* to?  
Will I listen to the One who created me,  
and the only One with the *power* to create and name me,  
who declares with affection, “*You are my beloved . . .*”  
Or will we listen to the voice of the *enemy* of God,  
the tempter in the wilderness,  
who whispers, accusingly . . . “*If you are . . .*”  
Jesus chose to listen to the baptismal voice.  
Which voice will *I* choose?

The voice of our Creator speaks love.  
It speaks acceptance of us, *as we are*,  
and calls us toward something even *greater*.  
We are possessed by God,  
and as such God has a stake in both who we are *now*,  
and who we will be *yet become*.  
Since God's stamp is placed on our lives,  
God has a stake in our future.  
God has a claim.  
“*You are my child. I love you.*”

Let us now, and always, tune our ears to that tender voice.  
And turn down the volume of all *other* voices  
that try to convince us otherwise.  
So that the *first* voice we hear when we rise in the morning,  
and the *last* voice we hear when we lie down at night,  
is the voice of the One who claims us, and says, “*You are mine.*”  
Who will say to us, in our times of fear,  
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.

—Phil Kniss, January 10, 2010