

## I Have Called You by Name

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Old Testament Reading. **But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”** Here ends our text.

There once was twelve-year-old boy who loved to make models, especially model boats. One day he went to the model store and purchased all the materials to make a model sailboat. He spent weeks putting it together. He had all the details just right: keel, rigging, sails, decking. When he was finished, he named her “Eleanor” after his grandmother and painted her name across the stern. One early morning he took Eleanor to the park for her first maiden voyage upon the lake. She sailed beautifully. But the wind caught her sails, and she ventured away from shore towards the middle of the lake. The boy ran after her along the shoreline, but a fog rolled in, and he soon lost sight of her. He ran all around the lake, but he never found her. To his dismay, she was lost. A week later the boy was walking through town when he glanced in the window of the pawnshop and saw his beautiful sailboat. He ran inside and pointed out his boat to the store clerk. “That’s my boat!” he exclaimed. “Are you sure?” the clerk asked. “You’re not the boy who brought that boat in here. Have you got a claim ticket?” “Well, no,” the boy replied, “but I know that’s my boat. I know everything about her down to the last detail, even her name.” “I’m sorry,” the clerk said, “but unless you have a claim ticket, you’ll have to buy it back.” The boy loved his boat. It was precious to him, so he ran home and brought back the contents of his piggy bank. He gave his entire savings in exchange for that boat. He redeemed his boat from the pawn shop. As he walked home, he held up his boat and said, “You are mine. In fact, you’re twice mine. You were mine when I created you, and you became mine again when I redeemed you.” And just to make sure everyone would know that Eleanor was his, he painted his name, Jimmy Crawford, across her bow.

The Lord loved people. He created people. He formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. He was complete from head to toe: bones, tendons, skin, organs, hair, even a soul. God called him man. But man and his descendents sailed away from the Lord. They sinned in the garden and were lost. But from one man, Abraham, God created a new people. First there was his son Isaac and then his grandson Jacob. From Jacob God formed a nation. He even put a new name on Jacob and called him and his descendents Israel. He called his people by name, “Israel, you are mine.” He created this nation. He formed this nation. He even redeemed this nation. When the angel of death stalked the land of Egypt, God fed death the first-born sons of the Egyptians as a ransom in place of their sons. He gave other men in exchange for their lives. “Israel, you are mine.”

But the Israelites too sailed away from the Lord. They prostituted themselves to other gods. They sold themselves to the gods of other nations. They sinned against the Lord in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey. And so the Lord poured on Israel the heat of his anger and the might of battle. The Lord used those other nations whose gods they served to carry them away to Assyria and finally to Babylon.

But the Lord still loved his people. He raised up the nation of Persia which swallowed up Babylon. And like a fish that spits out a fly to chomp on a minnow, so Persia spit out the nation of Israel so it could swallow bigger nations. God gave the nations of Egypt and Cush and Seba as a ransom for his people. Persia let Israel go and conquered those nations instead. Because Israel was precious to the Lord, he gave other people in return for them, the lives of other men in exchange for their lives. The Lord bought them back, and the exiles came home. **Now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”** “In fact, you’re twice mine. You were mine when I created you, and you became mine again when I redeemed you.” The Lord said, “I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar

and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name.” The Lord put his name on his people so everyone would know they were his.

When I received my vicarage placement to Le Mars, Iowa, I asked the pastor there to send me a pictorial directory of the congregation. It was a large congregation, over 800 members. I wanted to be able to call them each by name. So when I got the directory, I spent weeks pouring over the pictures and the names. I would scan the faces, memorize the names, test myself again and again. The first Sunday service came, and afterwards I confidently waited outside the chancel in the narthex. I thought I’d be able to greet them each by name. But unfortunately, the people didn’t cooperate. They didn’t come out of the church in alphabetical order, and they weren’t wearing the same clothes as they had on for their picture. Couples didn’t always come out together so I might get the husband’s name right but mistakenly call the woman behind him by his wife’s name. And that directory was a few years old too. Hairstyles and glasses and diets had changed. People didn’t look the same anymore. And keeping track of the kids was near impossible. I got some smiles as I greeted them by name but also some confused looks and sometimes a frown. I knew I didn’t even come close to getting all their names right.

Which brings up an important question. How does God do it? I mean, how does he know each of our names. There’s not just 800 but millions of us, billions of us. We’re always changing, getting older, fatter, balder. Even if you’re one in a million, that means there’s a thousand Chinese just like you. If I were God, the human race would look just like a flock of penguins to me, all the same. How does God keep track of us? How can God know you and call you by name?

Well, God created you. He formed you in your mother’s womb. And so he knows every detail about you: shade of eyes, shape of nose, curves of ear lobes, number and location of moles. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. The Lord knows all your mannerisms: your posture and stance, how you fidget, the sound you make when you clear your throat, sigh, and even snore. The Lord could pick you out of a lineup of not just 5 or 6, turn to the left, turn to the right, but out of a lineup of billions. “Yes, officer, he’s the one. I’d know him anywhere because I created him. I know him down to the last detail. I even know his name.”

But just like the Israelites, we too sailed away from the Lord. The moment God created us and began to form us in the womb, the original sin from our parents blew us into a fog. We could no longer see the image of God, nor navigate back to him. We couldn’t walk in his ways nor obey his laws. To God’s dismay, we were lost. Our souls were dead in our trespasses and sins. Death found us and imprisoned us.

But the Lord came into the morgue. And like only a grieving husband can identify the dead body of his wife, so the Lord said of us, “That’s my bride. I’d know her anywhere, down to the last detail.” But the Lord wasn’t the one to bring us into the morgue. We came of our own accord. We prostituted ourselves, sold ourselves to sin and death. The Lord had no claim ticket so he’d have to buy us back. But what would he give in exchange for us? Would he exchange the firstborn sons of another nation? Would he exchange even entire nations of men. No. This time the Lord exchanged just one man for us. He exchanged his firstborn Son for us. We were very precious to him, and so he gave all that he had, his only Son. God fed his Son to death. Death spit us out and chomped on bigger game. Jesus Christ gave his life as a ransom for you. God bought you back. He redeemed you and takes you home to heaven. He raises you up and says, “You are mine. In fact you’re twice mine. You were mine when I created you, and you became mine again when I redeemed you.”

And just to make sure everyone would know that you are his, God put his name on you. You were baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This same Triune God was present at Jesus’ baptism when heaven was opened. The Father spoke from heaven and the Spirit descended from heaven upon the Son in the form of a dove. This same Triune God was present at your baptism. He put his name on you and opened heaven for you. “Yes,” the Lord says, “I know you. I created you. I redeemed you. I have put my name on you. I have called you by name. You are mine.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.