

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Found!

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22
Isaiah 43: 1-7

Rev. Galen E. Russell III
January 10, 2010

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

Prayer: Your word speaks to us, O living God. May we hear your voice and be inspired to walk in your ways. Amen.

Last Sunday we started our year of Sunday worship services with the message that God has redemptive plans for anything we might face in this coming year. A wonderful word of hope to start with, wouldn't you say?

Today not only do we hear a reiteration of God's redemption in Isaiah's words, “do not fear, for I have redeemed you,” but we also hear what I experience as some of the most powerful, most moving words in all of scripture. Words of being claimed by God—“I have called you by name, you are mine;” words of being protected by God in some of the most difficult times of our lives—“when you pass through the waters, I will be with you, the rivers will not overwhelm you.” Words of being loved by God when we hear, “Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you.” Wow! The whole passage reflects the immeasurable love of God! Amen? Amen!

And it is very fitting also to have the story of Jesus' baptism today as well because in that passage we sense the power of the Spirit and the holy, immeasurable love of God descending upon Jesus. He hears God claiming him, "You are my Son." He hears God's holy love for him by calling him, "My Beloved. With you I am well pleased." He witnessed God's presence as the heavens opened.

And, no doubt we can sense the connections of Jesus' baptism and this Isaiah passage to the words I use when baptizing a child. When I am looking at that child, I quote God's words found in Isaiah. I say the child's name and say, "God says to you, 'I love you. I love you with an everlasting love. You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you to be my child. You are mine. You are my beloved!'" In other words, You are found! You are part of God's love, part of God's community, part of God's family!

I invite everyone to tune into these words! Focus in on them. Take them to heart—every time we participate in a baptism, every time you sit quietly in God's presence, every time you hear these words, really listen to them, really take them seriously: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. I love you." God says essentially, "Out of my love for you, I have searched for you and found you."

Are we listening? Do we hear God's voice still speaking to us these powerful, holy words? Everyday, I think we have to renew these words over and over again. Sometimes we get terribly distracted, and it becomes supremely difficult to hear these holy words. In our world of clatter and noise, we easily can become so hard of hearing that we're not even aware that God is looking for us. This concept doesn't even enter our consciousness. And then, when we DO experience something of God's grace, when we do feel God's presence, we're liable to think that WE found God. And, we might even think that... that it's a miracle.

But the real miracle is that God, the creator of all things in existence; God, the master designer of everything in the universe; God the only source of Love and Light and Life; God, who is infinitely divine and holy and whose power and beyond human comprehension—the miracle is that our holy God has found us!

I watched a DVD the other night called "Mark Lowry on Broadway." At one point Mark Lowry said that we sometimes feel that we have to go on the hunt to find out who this God is. But then he said, "You know what? In order for us to find out who God is, God would have had to have found us. In this great big universe, how are we going to find God? The best we can do is send a Tonka Truck to Mars. And it hit a rock named Barney and hasn't been heard from since! In this great big, ever-expanding universe, how're we ever going to find God? God

found us!” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kR_XG1DnDs, retrieved January 6, 2010). Amen? Amen!

And the search is ever-continuing. God is always searching for the heart and soul of individuals who have wandered away. God is forever looking for those whom God has redeemed, has called by name, and has claimed as God’s own, which is everybody through Jesus Christ. I believe God is constantly desiring that the incomparable message of a holy love offered for humanity is received by people in desperate need of that message. God never stops desiring for individuals to come back to home base, to hear the message that in Christ we are free... free from the entanglement that results from sin. Free from the estrangement from God which is also a consequence of sin.

When we are found by God, it’s “Olly Olly Oxen Free!” Do you remember what that means when we were kids playing “Hide and Go Seek?” It meant that players still out there hiding could come in to home base without penalty or consequence of losing the game. In doing some research, I found out that “Olly Olly Oxen Free” is really a derivative of the Old-English phrase “All ye, All ye outs, In free.” Translated that means “all of you, all of you who are still out there hiding, still away from home base, you may come in free! No penalty! Come in and be found!”

Theologically speaking, this is the gospel message of the Christian faith, isn't it? We may be out there hiding from God, hiding because of guilt that may be on our shoulders, hiding because of the shame that we may feel burdening our hearts for our mistakes. We may be hiding from the powers that be in society who can build up or destroy careers, lives, families. Whatever it is that we have done that makes us hide from God is put to rest because not only has God found us, but God also sent us a Savior who would get tagged on the way to home base.

You see, God was willing to give up whole nations, like Egypt as a ransom for us, like Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for us, but God also saw in Jesus a willingness to sacrifice his life so that others may know the immeasurable and incomparable love that God has for people.

Isaiah foretold it—God was willing to give up, “my Son, my Beloved” in exchange for our lives. All because God wanted to bring the people whom God created back. God said, “Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name.” With Jesus facilitating the redemption and salvation of this creation by going to the cross, God can now call out, “Olly, Olly Oxen Free!”

All of you out there hiding from God, come in free. Come in with no penalty. Come in and be found! Come in without guilt. Come in without shame. Come,

eat, drink. Come, be part of my love, my family, my community of faith. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.” I found you!

Think of the impact such an extravagant, grace-filled concept would have on cultural issues of our day, like the issue of health care or immigration. Stay tuned for next Sunday. We’ll hear more about those. Amen.