

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7

*¹ But 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.*

*² 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.*

*³ For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia[a] and Seba in exchange for you.*

*⁴ Because 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.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;*

*⁶ I 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—*

*⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”*

The prophet Isaiah, “sent by God, to speak for God to the people of Judah.” He slowly rose, and the crowd fell silent. Those at the back leaned forward, straining to hear. The atmosphere was electric. He spoke, and his carefully chosen words flew like swift arrows and found their mark. The great man, a spokesman for God, was warning and condemning. The crowd became restless – shifting positions, clenching fists, and murmuring. Some agreed with his message, nodding their heads and weeping softly. But most were angry, and they began to shout back insults and threats. Such was the life of a prophet whose purpose was to call the nation of Judah back to God and to tell of God’s salvation through the Messiah.” Gerhard von Rad goes on to define the Old Testament prophet as one who “participates in the emotions of God.”

Just as the prophet’s words called out to God’s chosen and beloved, but lost people of Isaiah’s day, the prophet’s message cries out today to all who wander away from God. The prophet not only warns of bad things that will happen if the lost do not return to God, he also continues to lay out before all people the emotions of God. Not all of God’s people were listening. Not all people listen today either. In Isaiah 43, the prophet pleads with the people of Judah, and he pleads with the lost today to return to our God, because our God loves all people more than we could ever imagine.

I will never forget the first time that I really got in touch with these verses in Isaiah 43. It was one of those “Aha” moments that made this scripture one of my favorites. I was in my early thirties and attending a morning women’s bible study. All the other women were older than me—they were retired—and mostly widowed women.

It was the first time I ever studied in any depth the book of Isaiah. Pastor Ralph led the group's discussion and what he said caught my attention and touched something deep inside me—a longing for exactly what I needed to hear. He put great emphasis on the fact that the prophet tells us that God calls us by name. He said that God calling us by name may not seem like such a big deal, but it is. He challenged us to take a moment and really think about it because when we do, we find that the verses that follow take on a richer and more personal meaning.

Take a moment to think about it, when someone wants to talk to you and they say your name, that person is expecting you to respond with your attention. They are not expecting anyone else to respond. Attached to your name are experiences, personality traits, values, a whole history of all kinds of things associated with your name that have accumulated over the years of your life and molded you into who you alone are.

So, when someone says your name, they are not just saying a bunch of letters put together to make up a word that spells your name; they are actually speaking or talking to everything that makes you who you are. They are acknowledging everything that makes you who you are. It can be a very personal acknowledgement if they know you well and God definitely knows you well.

I can think of three ladies named Cheryl that I have gotten to know well and who have somehow significantly influenced my life. A good friend of mine is named Sheryl. We met in a Sunday School class we both attended at Lititz COB. She is a faithful Christian and a devoted wife and mother. She is self-confident and honest. She rides her own motorcycle. She is the one who inspired me to get my license to ride a motorcycle. She and her husband moved to Florida, which is where she still lives. When she and her husband, who died a few years ago in a tragic bicycle accident, would head north on their motorcycles they often stopped to visit Don and me and we would go riding together.

Another Cheryl I know was a member of the last congregation I served at the Westminster COB. She is a very sensitive, emotional and compassionate woman. She loves God and faithfully serves him. She sang in our music group at the contemporary service and when she led worship, she shared her heart and got us emotionally involved in worship. She is very creative and artistic.

Then there is another Cheryl I knew. My brother married her after his first wife died of breast cancer. He barely knew her when they married, but he was desperately lonely and he wanted a wife. This Cheryl seemed nice when we first met her but after they were married, we quickly discovered she was manipulative and selfish. She forbade my brother from visiting or communicating with the rest of his family. She threw my nieces and eventually her own children out of the house. As I see it, all she really wanted was the money my brother got from his first wife's life insurance. My brother was miserable with her. Needless to say, we are glad she is out of our lives and we are reunited with my brother.

Here are three women I know named Cheryl who are all very different; and when I speak or think about each one of them, I in essence think about or speak about all that makes those individuals who they are. I have emotions that arise whenever they come to mind to me—personal and deeply moving emotions.

In the same way, when God calls you by name, it's very personal and intimate because God knows everything about you. When God thinks about us, there are particular concerns and specific emotions attached to God's thoughts. In Psalm 139 we can read one of David's songs written about how God intimately knows us. Listen:

¹ O Lord, You have searched me and known me. ² You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. ³ You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. ⁵ You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it. ⁷ Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? ⁸ If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰ Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; ¹² Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the

*light are both alike to You.*¹³ *For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb.*¹⁴ *I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.*

David totally would have understood what Isaiah was saying. Some people would say that I am simply stating the obvious; but if that is true, then why are there people who do not care about what they do, who are willing to hurt others purposely, who are negligent to creation, who are indifferent to their creator God and our Holy Savior, Jesus. If everyone understood and cared about what may seem so obvious, they would be humbled by God's presence; they would want to be obedient and pleasing to God. They would want to know him better, and they would want our Savior to walk by their side; and they would welcome the power of the Holy Spirit to fill them and guide them, and this world would be a much, much better place.

All Christians are challenged every day to open their hearts to hear God call their name. We need that daily because I believe that as we comprehend the depth of what it means to have God call us by name, then the verses that follow begin to take on more power to be filled with hope, and peace, and comfort. I believe we can gain a brighter perspective on life during trying times. I believe we experience joy more often in our lives.

The words the prophet spoke in verse two reminded God's chosen people of a significant experience of their ancestors—the time when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt and God parted the Red Sea, resulting in their escape from the army chasing them. It reminded them that God was there for them in the past and will be there for them again as they hope for freedom once more. This reminder supported the prophets cry to them that they should not be afraid.

Likewise, God calls us by name and says to us, “Don't be afraid” when you get into things way over your head, when you get into deep waters and the dark side of life overwhelms you because I am always with you. I will be there with you as you make the difficult journey alone. Hold onto me for your security. God does this for you when you are blindsided by pain and troubles. And God does this for you even when you've made the decisions that got you into a mess in the first place. That's amazing! This gives us hope and the will to persevere in trying times.

God calls us by name and promises to help us when life seems to have brought us to a dead end of hopelessness. There are no dead ends in life if we know God. Even the end of life in this lifetime is not a dead end when we walk with Jesus because God promises us eternal life with him.

In verse 3, the prophet's words speak of God's redemption as demonstrated through the defeat of other nations for his chosen people's freedom. As we read these words today, we can hear Isaiah tell us that God calls us by name and tells us that we don't need to be afraid because even though we fail time after time, God redeems us. We experience this as we have confidence in the price paid for our sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus. There's just no way that we can experience the freedom and comfort that comes with God's redemption if we cannot embrace God's acceptance of us and his desire to eliminate anything that could stand in the way of having an intimate relationship with him.

Dennis Byrd was an up-and-coming defensive superstar for the New York Jets football team, who was expected to help turn the Jets around. But on November 29, 1992, when the Jets were playing the Chiefs, Byrd was about to sack the quarterback when he collided with a teammate. His spinal cord snapped.

He awoke in the middle of the night at Lenox Hospital in a halo brace, not knowing where he was, why he couldn't move, and what was happening. Suddenly, he went from dreaming of making it to the Pro Bowl to hoping that someday he could once more hold his daughter in his arms.

From a worldly perspective, Byrd was no longer able to reach his potential. But in God's eyes, Byrd was capable of more than sacking quarterbacks. As the world watched and listened, Byrd told the media that Christ was his source of comfort in his time of tragedy. The doctors said Byrd would likely never walk again, but Byrd said that with God's help, he would.

On opening day of the 1993 football season, less than a year after his spinal-cord injury, Byrd walked to the Middle of the Meadowlands Stadium while 75,000 fans cheered. The miracle in Byrd's life is not that he broke his neck and walked again. The miracle is that the injury that destroyed his career didn't destroy his life.

January 9, 2022 – Called by Name

What an amazing God we have! God created us, knows everything about us, redeems us in spite of all of our failures and promises to be with us through the highs and lows of life, not only as a group of people, but as individuals. Our God calls us by name and loves us more than we can ever possibly comprehend. Therefore, our lives have meaning, purpose, direction and hope. Amen.