## Isaiah 43:1-7

 **1** But now, this is what the LORD says—
       he who created you, O Jacob,
       he who formed you, O Israel:
       "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
       I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

**2** When you pass through the waters,
       I will be with you;
       and when you pass through the rivers,
       they will not sweep over you.
       When you walk through the fire,
       you will not be burned;
       the flames will not set you ablaze.

 **3** For I am the LORD, your God,
       the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
       I give Egypt for your ransom,
       Cush and Seba in your stead.

 **4** Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
       and because I love you,
       I will give men in exchange for you,
       and people in exchange for your life.

 **5** Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
       I will bring your children from the east
       and gather you from the west.

 **6** I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'
       and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'
       Bring my sons from afar
       and my daughters from the ends of the earth-

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

## Luke 3:15-22 (New International Version)

 **15**The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. **16**John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. **17**His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

 **21**When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened **22**and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

 “Loved by Name”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

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This is the first Sunday after we celebrate Epiphany, when we also remember Jesus’ baptism. Both reasons for remembrance focus on essentially the same thing. Epiphany is about the manifestation of God; the revelation of God to us in his Son, Jesus. Knowing exactly who Jesus is was important to those who were with him, and to those who choose to follow him, even now.

I think I may have told you before that one of my favorite authors when I was in junior high, who became a favorite author of mine again in college and again when I rediscovered her about twenty years ago is Madeleine L’Engle. She’s best known for her quartet of books that begins with *A Wrinkle in Time*. What many of you may not know is that she is also well known for her Christian writings, and as decidedly, for the Christian themes underpinning her fictional work. You may be more aware that C.S. Lewis wrote in this way, too. I didn’t know this as a child, and missed some of the dramatic ways in which she presents her ideas in the first books I read by her. Even to this day, though, the strong battle between good and evil that she depicts in *A Wrinkle in Time* makes sense to me in ways beyond what she called “It” and the Murray family. Clear to me even then, was an idea that seems even more significant in light of today’s reading.

Certainly, you don’t need to know the entire plot of the novel to understand how a young brother is saved by love. When he is held in the throes of Evil, unable to act on his own, his sister reaches out to him—by calling him by name. What becomes clear to the little boy, without being stated, is that only those who know him can really love him. Only those who know his name truly know who he is. Anything short of loving his whole being is not love at all; not the kind of love that can save him. Doesn’t it seem not so surprising, then, to learn that the author of this book was a devoted Christian whose more notably adult works were unequivocally Christian in theme, as well? Do you hear echoes of the text from Isaiah in the actions of her most famous novel? God loves us, and knows us, and calls us by name.

I want to quote L’Engle directly because her simple restatement of what I believe is the core of our faith bears hearing. “What I believe is so magnificent, so glorious, that it is beyond finite comprehension. To believe that the universe was created by a purposeful, benign Creator is one thing. To believe that this Creator took on human vesture, accepted death and mortality, was tempted, betrayed, broken, and all for love of us, defies reason. It is so wild that it terrifies some Christians who try to dogmatize their fear by lashing out at other Christians, because tidy Christianity with all answers given is easier than one which reaches out to the wild wonder of God's love, a love we don't even have to earn.”

God’s love is a wild wonder, isn’t it? We don’t even have to earn it, and it exists for us through the most difficult passages of our lives. To try to understand this a little bit, we might consider those persons in our lives who call us by particular names. Have you ever had a nickname? A way of shortening your name that only your family uses? For my part, my heart warms when I hear people call out, “Hey, Lis,” and I imagine that might be how God would call me. Another nickname I had actually began with my brother, whom my dad called Adam Bomb. For some reason, he then began to call me Lisa Bomb, and it stuck. I can almost hear him saying it now. My brother-in-law tells the story of his own family name in a way that illustrates how important is the name people call you. Lance went to a family reunion around twenty years ago and was surprised when each new person he met introduced him or herself as So-and-so Koch; my brother-in-law’s family, so he thought, was Tkacs, pronounced like tax. Finally, he asked one of his new relatives how he spelled his name, and he said t, k, a, c, s. So, the Czech roots of their family had somehow been obscured.

When Lance asked his dad why they pronounced their name differently from all the rest of the family, Henry told an interesting story. He was 17 when he joined the Marines during World War II. During boot camp at the first morning roll call, the sergeant repeatedly called outTax, Tax, with each time louder and eventually angrily. The sergeant then spelled the name, t, k, a, c, s, to which Henry responded. That’s my name, sir, but it is pronounced Koch. “From now on you’ll go by Tax,” said the sergeant, and Henry did—and so did the following generations, so that my sister is Kim Tkacs, pronounced tax. For Henry, it became habit and in some measure carried the pride he felt at having served. I wonder, though, what God now calls him. What would God call you?

Doesn’t it make sense, when we think of the people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary, the select readings for any particular day, that we read about Jesus’ baptism on the day we read our passage from Isaiah? We learn much about Jesus’ identity in this passage, and we learn much about our own baptisms. Into what love are we baptized? Into whose work are we commissioned? I have mentioned before that I read very regularly a lectionary response by Kate Huey, who has shared her responses on the website of the national setting of the United Church of Christ. She quotes Martin Luther this week, in saying, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." I think Martin Luther wanted us to remember each day who we are, and whose we are, and how beloved we are. Even in an age when we spend so much time talking about "self esteem," don't we still long to hear that we are beloved?”

Don’t we still long to hear that we are beloved? We are! We are loved wildly, wonderfully, by God, who knows us by name. We have been baptized into this love, not only washed from our sins by the water, but baptized into this love by the power of the Holy Spirit. Kate Huey also mentions in her reflection that God’s acts so often are accompanied by what she lightly refers to as special effects. Here, we can think of the water, fire and wind that we associate with the Holy Spirit. Just how is it that the heavens opened up at Jesus’ baptism? . . . What does it mean for US, too, that the heavens open up with the Holy Spirit? It is this same spirit that is present in our baptisms; in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper; in the gathering of the Church; in our daily walks.

So, we can remember each day who we are, whose we are, and how beloved we are.

 **“**When you pass through the waters,
       God will be with you;
       and when you pass through the rivers,
       they will not sweep over you.
       When you walk through the fire,
       you will not be burned;
       the flames will not set you ablaze,” for you are precious and honored in God’s sight. Amen.