

## God Makes a Way

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The First Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Baptism of Christ  
January 13, 2018

“I have called you by name, you are mine.” – Isaiah 43:1b

Some of you will recall that the ceremony of baptism, or the Rite of Christian Initiation, as it's formally known, includes a question from me and an answer from a baby's family as to the child's name. It's part of a little dialogue between us, and it goes like this:

“What is this child's name?”

“Such-and-Such-All-Three-Or-More-Names.”

“And why have you brought this child here today?”

“To be baptized into the faith and family of Jesus Christ.”

That little Q&A isn't necessary, of course. I already know what the child's name is and I already know why the child's family has brought the baby to church on that particular Sunday. This moment of the ritual isn't a fact-finding mission. It's partly historical relic, and it's partly a declaration of trust and intent.

In an earlier day, before babies were born in hospitals and before they received their formal name by being registered with the state through their birth certificate, baptism or christening was the child's entrance into the life of a community. And the church represented the community. It was a microcosm of the community, and it kept the community's records. Those of us who've done genealogical research know that sooner or later, if you go back far enough, you have to work with church records, because the churches were the ones who kept and preserved the written record of a community's life.

Over time, the state gradually assumed the church's role, and some of us aren't convinced that the state is up to that task. A state is a bureaucracy, and it may be good at record-keeping, but a bureaucracy isn't a community, and it's certainly not a family. And it's communities and families that get us through life. It's the people who know us and love us and can help us find our way that are essential. God uses those people, those communities and families, to make a way for us in the world, and a state bureaucracy is no substitute for a face-to-face community.

And baptism recognizes that fact. Baptism recognizes a person's first family, and provides for a person's entrance into her or his second family, the family of the people of God. That second family is different from the biological family that produced the baby – and we in the church family should always be working to avoid the various dysfunctions of human families – but there is much about a person's welfare that we share.

Human families and church families want much of the same thing for every person: for them to be happy, to be moral, to be safe, and to be productive. We want people to be able to live out their calling as the daughters and sons of God – to be fully human, in other words, as Jesus was fully human – and when a person is baptized, we in the church pledge our support to help them do that, because

life has taught us that we all need help. We need the help of our families and our friends and our communities, and ultimately we all need for God to make a way for us in the world. We Americans live with the myth of the self-made person, and that's what it is – a myth. We can strive and accomplish and achieve and imagine that we did it on our own, but the fact of the matter is that without God, none of us would be here today.

No one knows that better than an orphan, and as many of you know, I am an orphan. My father died when I was five years old, and my mother died when I was eight. One of my older brothers and his family and his community raised me, and they saved me not only from a life of dissolution and an early grave, but also from the bureaucracy of the state. Until I went off to college and began to interact with the world as a bureaucracy, I had a family and a community to provide for me, however odd and strained those relationships sometimes became. It wasn't always easy growing up as an outsider – and which child doesn't feel like an outsider at some point? – but God made a way for us and we got it to work.

And not only did God have a plan to see me through those uncertain years, God even had a back-up plan for me in the persons of Aunt Jean and Uncle Doc. And God had a second back-up plan for me in the persons of my sisters, Mae and Sandy. The chasm that opened before me at my mother's death could have swallowed me up, but as the psalmist says of God, “He redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with faithful love and compassion” (103:4). I know why the psalmist said that. He said it because it's true. I don't think it's true and I don't believe it's true. I've lived it true.

Here's something else from the Bible I know to be true. “When my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” That's from another psalm (27:10), and the late Bill Polkon, whom most of us in this church knew for decades, lived that reality. Bill's mother died when he was a child, and his father couldn't raise Bill and his siblings. Bill was taken in by friends of his family, and he was raised by them until he joined the service in the Second World War.

The Lord takes us up when others, for whatever reasons, let us down. We all need help, and a lot of it, to get through this life. We need someone to make a way for us, and the one we can always count on is God.

That's the declaration of trust and intent embedded in that Q&A of the baptismal rite. And that's the declaration of trust and intent embedded in our text for this morning: “I have called you by name, you are mine.” We declare a baby's name, all of it, out loud, at baptism to say who this child is and whose this child is. This child is about to become part of the people of God.

The speaker in Isaiah's prophecy is God and the you is Israel. The Hebrew name *yisra`el* means “the one who struggles with El,” and El was one of the names by which Israel knew God. God's name was baked right into Israel's identity, and Israel knew that. Israel knew it because there was no other way to explain Israel's existence.

The people of Israel knew that, by rights, they shouldn't exist. They should've been destroyed long before their psalmists and prophets ever got the chance to put their people's experience of God into words. The empires that enslaved Israel, that occupied Israel, that destroyed Israel – they all took their shot at sending Israel into oblivion, and yet Israel survived. Israel survived, and it was never easy. Israel knew what it meant to struggle with God – to hold onto faith when the waters are deep and the fires are intense.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,” God promised Israel in the next lines of Isaiah's prophecy. “When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned – the flame shall not consume you.”

No promise of a carefree life for Israel in those words. Instead, the prophet who loved Israel and wanted what was best for Israel predicted deep waters and fire – symbols of all of those forces that threaten to undo us, that threatened to undo Israel. Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans – the threatening forces were a steady, menacing presence throughout Israel's history. And yet Israel survived – struggling with God, being *yisra`el* – and recognizing that God, their God, had made for them a way.

One of the reasons I love Michelangelo's famous fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of God reaching out to give Adam life, and Adam reaching out to God to accept it is because it shows us the way life really is, not just for Adam but for all of us. God may breathe the breath of life into each of us to get us started, but for us to make it through life, we constantly need to be reaching out to God who is always reaching out to us. God always makes a way for those who trust and hold fast to the One who is always reaching out to them. That way may not be easy and it may not be clear. It may not be without its menacing threats. But it's always there, because God is always there. Waiting for us to reach out for help. God has called us by name to help us find the way – the way for us, “Hey, Marilyn, I'm over here” – and all we have to do is listen and follow.

I wonder if it would be a good idea for us to add this morning's words from Isaiah 43 when we pass people through the waters of baptism: “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.”

Here at Faith, we typically sprinkle a little water on a baby's head to baptize her; we who are older know that deep waters are headed her way. The intense heat of struggle also – perhaps with identity, perhaps with addiction, perhaps with domestic conflict, perhaps with illness, perhaps with poverty, but certainly with something – that blistering pain is headed the little boy's way as well. It's inevitable in this life.

And if children have been taught by those around them, by word and deed, to trust that God has already made a way for them in this world – they'll make it. They'll make it with joy and grace and peace through this world if they take the path that God has laid out for them. God has made a way of peace, of love, of justice, and of joy for each and every one of us, at every step in this life's journey; and, if we take it, we'll make it.