



## 'No Ordinary Sunday: Voices from Heaven'

Baptism of Our Lord  
8:30 & 10:45 am, Sunday, January 10, 2016  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton  
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#); [Acts 8:14-17](#); [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me!"

Yeah, right. We all know that being called names can hurt. Funny, I can remember way back to when I was in second grade as my earliest recollection of someone calling me a name. My friend Mary Jane and I were walking home from school, and a boy from our class named Michael came up to me and called me a \_\_\_\_\_. Oh, this was not an expletive-deleted, some four-letter or off-color word that I simply won't reveal here. But it was an insult, and I choose not to repeat it. I began to cry, ran the rest of the way home, opened the front door, ran up to the second floor where my mom was cleaning the bathroom, and sobbed: "Mommy, Michael called me a \_\_\_\_\_." I continued to cry, then took a breath and asked, "Mommy, what does \_\_\_\_\_ mean?"

As a second-grader, I had no clue what Michael called me. I only knew it was not a nice name. It was his plan to be that voice in my head that defined me. He intended to hurt me. And looking back now, I wonder if someone called Michael that name, for him to know how hurtful it could be. What voices were in his head?

Don't you think it is strange and sad that I can remember being called this name back in 1965? And if I can recall this incident from when I was 7 years old, think about all those other names hurled at you and me over a lifetime. Betcha it wouldn't take much time for each of us to dredge up a few choice names we've been given. Such is the power of words. The power of suggestion. The power of a label.

There is great risk to our personhood when those powerful names stick. They become the voices we hear when we look in the mirror:

Oh, you're fat.

You're stupid.

You messed up again.

No one likes you.

It's all your fault.

You're a hopeless cause.

And the voices we hear begin to define us, worming their way into us until we actually believe them. Until we actually consider them either part or the whole of our identity.

Today we learn about a different voice. A voice from heaven. A voice emanating from the Creator who has given you and me the breath of life. And this voice has something important to say to you and me.

But first this voice has something important to say about Jesus—which in the long run, has everything to do with what that voice continues to say to us.

Today is the festival of the “Baptism of Our Lord.” Each year at this time we read from one of the gospel books in our Bible’s New Testament of the account of Jesus being baptized—participating in a ritual bath in the Jordan River. All four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) refer to this event, although John’s reference is more implicit than explicit. The point is that, for the early Christian church, this was a pivotal moment in the story of Jesus Christ, in the story of God saving us. Oh, our gospels differ slightly from one another in the re-telling of Jesus’ baptism. A few specifically tell us John the Baptist was the one who performed the baptism. Two only imply this. Mark and Luke recount how a voice from heaven spoke only to Jesus, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Matthew states the voice instead spoke to the crowds gathered at the Jordan River: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” All four gospels clearly describe how Jesus is given the gift of the Holy Spirit at that moment, and it pours down upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

Despite the differences among the gospels, it’s clear they all agree: This moment of Jesus’ baptism is the moment that defines him. He hears a voice from heaven telling him who he is: *This is your identity. You are my Son. I love you. I am pleased with you.*

That voice from heaven identifies Jesus and clarifies what that identity means. Now, in 2016, we probably don’t see how radical this declaration is that the voice from heaven is making. Remember—the earthly Jesus lived during the time of the great Roman Empire. The title “Son of God” was reserved for great men of power and influence. Caesar Augustus, when he ruled the empire, allowed himself to be worshiped as a living god. His stepson Tiberius, who was Roman Emperor in the final years of Jesus’ life, actually had coinage made that read “Son of the divine Augustus.” In other words, “son of god.” But our gospel writers tell this story of Jesus’ baptism so we can learn the truth—we discover who the real “Son of God” is.

And because this story, in its various forms, has been handed down, generation to generation, you and I and Christians of every time and place hear that voice from heaven defining Jesus for us. We know his identity. We know Jesus to be the Son of God. Beloved. Gifted with power from on high. Pleasing to God the Father and Creator of all.

It is absolutely critical we read this story every year. Just as it is absolutely critical that we remember our own baptism daily. Look, I realize many of us may struggle to recall the date our baptism took place. Uhh, let’s see—mine was ... March 2, 1958. Perhaps there’s a baptismal certificate somewhere, stuck inside a baby book, or in a pile of papers. Even if we know the date, it seems long ago and far away, and so much else has happened since then to define us. A little bit of water back then, but since then, so much water under the bridge. So much else has happened in the intervening years to make us believe we are \_\_\_\_\_ some days.

This is why we need to remember our own baptism every day and why, if you haven't yet been baptized, it's time you and I can have a conversation. See Jesus himself would eventually hear vile things uttered by hateful voices as a he hung on a cross for us. He would be mockingly called "King of the Jews!" with an offensive sign placed over his head as he died. If this Jesus himself experienced a lifetime's worth of name-calling that attempted to define him falsely....and yet still was called God's Son by name, still was beloved by God, still was empowered by the Spirit, and still was raised from the dead by God the Father and given new life after sticks and stones broke him, and names stung him...then what might all this say about **us**? About **our** being baptized, not by John the Baptist, but being baptized into the very life, death and resurrection of this Jesus?

Baptism says you and I have an identity given to us by God that is unshakeable, permanent and true: **We** are God's children, too. **We** are beloved, too. **We** are given gifts of the Spirit so we can live out that identity in a world that seems hell-bent on labeling us wrongly. We need this story, we need to remember our baptism, so the false and hateful voices that ring in our ears on a daily basis can at last be drowned out by THE ONE VOICE of unconditional love. **AMEN.**

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