

Called by Name

Isaiah 43:1-7

It's been a couple of decades since sociologist Robert Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, about the disruption of community groups, how people aren't joining groups or organizations anymore. Yet recently, a study commissioned by health insurer Cigna determined one of the biggest challenges facing people of all ages is loneliness. More than half of survey respondents — 54 percent — said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well. Fifty-six percent reported they sometimes or always felt like the people around them "are not necessarily with them." And 2 in 5 felt like "they lack companionship," that their "relationships aren't meaningful" and that they "are isolated from others."

Loneliness, or social isolation, has a huge impact. It raises the risk of premature death by up to 50%, ranking near smoking and alcohol use. It increases risks of dementia and mobility loss. Lonely, isolated people are around 25% more likely to die prematurely. It happens sometimes to older people as children grow up and move away, spouses die, and health issues make it more difficult to engage in social activities. Yet it also happens to younger people, who despite high numbers of friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter or Instagram have fewer friends in "real life." Some health professionals say we have a loneliness epidemic.

Loneliness isn't just a problem out there. At large public universities, students can feel like a number instead of a name. A couple years ago, when Iowa State University's enrollment was 36001, the ISU bookstore sold shirts that said "36,001 students chose Iowa State University" on the front and "I'm the 1" on the back. While it was good to think that you were special, that you were the one, that still doesn't mean you're a name.

While it's sometimes good to go through life anonymously, there are downsides, especially when trouble comes. We long for a place like Cheers, where everybody knows your name. That's why it's so comforting to know God calls us by name.

It was comforting for the people of Israel, too. Especially where they were. The previous chapter of Isaiah is full of doom and gloom and judgment. God called them out for their spiritual blindness and deafness, in following false gods and worshiping idols,

drifting away from the true God's commands. When they are conquered by their stronger neighbors, their best and brightest brought to Babylon in chains, they feel abandoned by God. After all, if they are God's chosen people, how could something like this happen to them?

That's who Isaiah is writing to. A people whose self-confidence has been shattered, who dreamed that their life would be so much more than the nightmare they were living. Their well-constructed lives have come crashing down, and they are left feeling broken and alone, hopeless and insecure.

But after judgment comes hope. God gives them a reason to be hopeful and confident. They have been called by name. They belong to God. Their confidence comes not from themselves, their strengths, their abilities. Their confidence comes from God. God is the one who made them a people. God had rescued them from trouble before, and he would again. God had been with them through trials and tribulations, and would still be with them even when they were so far from home, so far from where they wanted to be.

More than that, God isn't just some impersonal force that doesn't care about them. God is personal. One of the tricky things in reading the Bible is that the original languages have different words for when "you" is singular and "you" is plural. Most of us English speakers don't do that, don't say "y'all" or "all y'all."

Most of the time, God is speaking to a group of people. Being in the community of believers requires a community, after all. Here, though, God is speaking in the singular. One on one. Just to you. It's a message that is individual and intimate, particular and personal. It's not just all y'all as a people who have been called by name. It is you, individually. The message of hope from Isaiah is a personal message.

That message of hope is personal, for you, as well. In Baptism, God called you by name, led you through water from death to new life, and gave you the fire of the Holy Spirit. While a splash of water, the flame of a candle, and a printed certificate may not look like much, it's in the little things that God works. When you hear a pastor say "in the stead and by the command of

our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you,” that is God personally saying to you that you are forgiven. When you receive the bread and wine, Christ’s body and blood that was given for you for the forgiveness of sins, that is for each and every one of you, individually. You have been chosen. You have been called by name.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church, Ames, Iowa
Baptism of Our Lord
January 13, 2019

And because you have been called by name, because you have been chosen by God to be God’s beloved child, you have promises that God will never let you go. God promises that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

In Baptism, God called you by name. God says to you, “You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.” And with that, God promises to be with you through the waters and fires, chances and changes of life. Not because you are good, or holy, or anything else that you did. God’s love is not a conditional love. You are not chosen because you are special. You are special because you are chosen, a beloved child of God.

A group of Japanese students came to Memorial a few years ago. Several of them had host families from Memorial members, and a couple were even Christian, a rarity when only 1% of Japanese people are Christian. Yet it seemed as though coming to church had a greater impact on the students who weren’t Christian. One of them said she liked coming to church because she was welcomed and loved. In Japanese culture, that kind of caring only is shown to immediate family members. They were greeted by name, even if we’d sometimes stumble over their foreign sounding names. They were greeted with love.

And being called by name by God brings us into community with others called by name by God. Others who share that name, who have had Jesus’ name placed on them in baptism, create a community that helps and cares for each other.

You have been called by God. You have been called by name by God. God loves you, not because of your self-confidence or ambition, grades or major, finances or family. God loves you for Christ’s sake, and will never let you go.