

You Are Mine

January 13, 2019: The Baptism of Our Lord

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

This morning we officially welcome Emma Kaye into the household of God. It is a household that is unpredictable, that demands our utmost creativity and flexibility; it is a household that is sometimes more chaotic than we'd like. (It is a household that seems to know when the choir anthems will be a *cappella* and so the organ refuses to turn on. Things like that!) It is a household that is unpredictable, a little more chaotic than we'd like, that demands our creativity, ingenuity, flexibility, and grace with one another. It is a household in which we trust, and know, that the Holy Spirit is present with us in all of that mess.

Today the prophet Isaiah is speaking God's words to the Israelites, who are in exile in Babylon--which is at the very least to say that they are far from home, far from where they thought they would be. Indeed their world is more chaotic, more messy, than they would like. They are trying, they are hoping beyond hope, to touch - and feel - God right there with them.

Right before this passage, Isaiah has been reflecting with them and asking them to consider how their own behaviors might have contributed, in part, to the mess and pain in which they find themselves; how their own blind spots, their weaknesses, their selection of fear over trust and self over whole may, in part, have contributed to this exile. Isaiah writes, *This is - we are - a people robbed and plundered, all of us trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; we have become a prey with no one to rescue us; we have become a spoil with no one to say, "Restore!" Who among you, Isaiah implores, will give heed to this? Who will listen? Who was it, he puzzles, who gave up Israel to the robbers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways we would not walk, whose law we would not obey?*

Right in the midst of this, says the Lord, who created you, who formed you, *Do not fear. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine.*

When I hear this phrase I often think of our oldest child, now seven, was a toddler and learning to speak. I remember one day, as Andy and I were in the car with him and I was trying to get him to say some of the few words that he knew, I turned toward the back and asked, "Owen, who am I?" [anticipating that he'd say "Mama", his first word] and he said, "MINE."

"You are MINE." That's what God says to us today and especially to Emma: *You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned; the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your Savior.*

It is no coincidence, then, that we hear this reading as we recognize and celebrate the baptism of Jesus himself, and soon of baby Emma. I've often puzzled, as you may have, too, why was *Jesus* baptized? If Jesus was - and is - fully God, why did he need to be baptized into the household of God? Wasn't that already true? If Jesus was without sin, why did he need his sins to be washed away in those waters? If Jesus, being without sin, was not far from God - as we are - but in fact *is* God, then why did Jesus need, in baptism, to be called back to God?

This is perhaps the first way that Jesus shows us that he never leaves us on our own. He walks through those waters as his ancestors have, and we all will. He emerges from those waters of death with new life; he emerges out of that struggle with more strength than he ever knew he had. Directly after his baptism (as we'll hear in a few weeks when Lent starts), he goes out into the wilderness, where he's tempted and tried and challenged in every way. Everything is hard. How can he see his way through? He emerges finally, after forty days and forty nights--which essentially is to say, eternity--to teach his friends and followers not in some abstract, theoretical way, but out of his own experience and struggles.

As he teaches out of his experience, he will quote this very same passage from Isaiah when he teaches about the Good Shepherd, saying, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and they know me. I call them by name." How powerful it is to consider that the God who creates us and forms us, yet so often seems absent, knows and calls us by name. It is so powerful that about seventy years ago, a couple of women in Italy who had been shaped by Maria Montessori imagined a whole approach to the spiritual education of little ones, called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The Catechesis of - none other than the - Good Shepherd knows that the child has everything inside them already that they need to know and recognize God. They do not need any grown-ups to say, "This is the right way to think about God. This is the correct belief. Write it down."

The Catechesis of none other than the Good Shepherd knows that the grown-up is to come up alongside the little ones, to care for their environment as a shepherd would for his sheep, and to provide opportunities for the child to wonder and explore, opportunities to work and to create, as if the child is saying, silently, "Help me find God by myself."

In a typical lesson, the adult (or the "catechist") proclaims a Gospel parable--very often, it's the parable of the Good Shepherd--plainly and simply, with no additional explanations offered, only at times inviting the child to wonder: "I wonder how that shepherd felt all the way out there in the field. Were there any other grown-ups around? Did he have any friends with him? What did he see? How many sheep were there? How did he know when all of them were with him? I wonder what the Good Shepherd felt like when one of those sheep wandered away. I wonder what the sheep felt like when it had wandered away and it didn't know where it was anymore. How would you feel if you couldn't see the shepherd anymore? I wonder what it felt like to hear the shepherd call your name, even though you couldn't see the shepherd, even though you were really scared, even though you didn't know where you were or what was going to happen. I wonder what it felt like to hear your name."

Sofia Cavalletti shares in her book *The Religious Potential of the Child* a number of stories of little ones responding to these truths. She shares that children who are sick or differently abled or struggling in any way--physically, cognitively, emotionally--have a "special sensitivity" to this parable. She shares a story of a little girl, not even three years old, named Maria who was being treated for cancer in a hospital in Rome. She was from a different part of the country, and her parents were only able to visit her relatively infrequently. She writes, "one cannot describe the sadness in her small face, nor the impossibility of establishing any rapport with her." Even the other children in the hospital shared that, "She's always on her own. She doesn't say anything. Sometimes we hear her cry, a lot, but we've never heard her talk" [paraphrased]. One day, "a catechist went to the hospital with the intention of speaking to Maria about the Good Shepherd's love" for her. As the catechist shared the Gospel--plainly, simply, unadorned--the catechist felt like her endeavors to communicate were "completely in vain"; there was no discernible response from the little girl.

Yet, as the catechist continued to speak, other children from the floor gathered in the room, around Maria's bed. Even then, Maria seemed "to be far away, if not actually asleep." Yet, the catechist noticed that Maria's breathing became calmer, and when the catechist began to "rise slowly from the chair...Maria stood up abruptly, threw herself into the catechist's arms and kissed her. [Maria] cleared space on her bed for the materials [of the sheep and shepherd] and indicated," "Please tell me again about the Good Shepherd!" The catechist did, and then Maria "entreated [her] to hold her, carry her around the room, and feed her when dinner arrived. When it came time for the catechist to leave, Maria...let her leave only [on the condition] that she return the next day." The nurse who was on duty overnight heard Maria, the child who had not spoken, singing softly to herself, "He knows my name" (quoted and paraphrased from pp. 70-71).

Emma, today the God who creates you and forms you calls you by name. As you pass through the waters of baptism, as our Lord Jesus has, God seals you and shows his love for you--a love that will not end, no matter what you do, or don't do. Emma, in your heart you already know God quite well. God already is living and active within you, and oh, how we see God in you, in those bright blue eyes, in that humongous smile, and even as you nap in your daddy's arms. Your parents, your godparents, and all your family will promise today to help you find God in your own ways, in ways that are true to you. Emma, as your parents, family,

and so many of us here already know, life is not always simple; it gets complicated; it gets hard. It's not without suffering, and it's not without pain. Our Lord Jesus does not leave us alone. Emma Kaye, there is nothing you ever could do, or feel, or believe, to take you from the love of the God who created you and creates you, who redeems you, in whose sight you are precious and always will be; who says today and all the days of your life, "I love you. With you I am well pleased."