

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:3-17

I was named after my great-grandmother, Anny Karlsson Swanson, and by all accounts she was a character. Her first husband was a miner and he brought her from Sweden to the United States in 1898. My grandmother, their second daughter, was born in Victor, CO, which for the last century has been a mining town. Back in the day, women weren't allowed in saloons, so the story goes that Anny and other miners' wives would play cards in the kitchen of the saloon while their husbands drank at the bar.

My last name is Sundberg – Swedish for “mountain by the fjord.” I’ve gotten some pushback through the years for not changing my name to Parton when I married John. My reply has always been that I am proud of my family name and the heritage that it represents for me.

Why don’t you turn to someone sitting near you right now and tell that person what you know about your own name – who named you, who you were named after, what your name means, if you know...

Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, a list of Jesus’s ancestors going all the way back to Abraham. Some of the names in that list are familiar to us because their stories are in the Old Testament: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rahab, Ruth, King David. Other names are unfamiliar to us. Matthew’s purpose in beginning his story with this list is to make it clear who Jesus is – that he is both a human man with a story and a past and the son of God. In those days, just as in many families nowadays, it was common for a first born son to be named for one of his ancestors. But Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth includes an angel coming to Joseph in a dream to tell him to name the baby “Jesus”, or in Hebrew “Yeshua” which means “God saves.” Matthew then tells his readers that this all takes

place to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that a child was to be born who would be called Emmanuel, or "God-with-us."

God saves. God-with-us. God's names for God's son.

This morning's scene opens at the Jordan River, where John the Baptizer has been calling on people to repent. John the Baptizer, that wild-looking, rabble-rousing preacher who lived out in the wilderness. John has been inviting people to come and be baptized, washed clean. He has also spoken of someone else, someone who is still to come, One who will baptize not with water, but with the fire of the Holy Spirit. Imagine the crowds of people lined up, ankle-deep in the mud on the bank, then wading into the waist-deep water one by one. What must have crossed John's mind when he sees that the next person in line is the One he has just been talking about, Jesus, the One who fulfills his prophecy? "Wait a minute. It ought to be the other way around," John cries out. "I need to be baptized by you, and here you are coming to me?" We might ask the same question. Why did Jesus need to be baptized if he was perfect and sinless? Jesus, whose very name means "God saves," what did he need to repent of?

Jesus answers John's question: "To do this now is to fulfill all righteousness. To do this now is to be faithful to God's will. To do this now is to walk in God's path."

God saves. God-with-us. In the moment when Jesus rises back up out of the water, the heavens open and god's own Spirit comes down to alight on him in the form of a dove. And God names him yet again: Beloved Son.

In a few minutes we are going to witness God working yet again in a ceramic bowl of water and the power of the Holy Spirit. Sophie, Harper and Audrey are sisters, and their whole family is here – their parents Ben and Saphron, their grandma Kit [others].

And all those family members whose lives on earth have ended are here as well. Over time, Sophie, Harper and Audrey will learn the stories of their own family, their own ancestors. They will learn where their names come from and what they mean. Over time, they will also learn more about Jesus, their brother and Savior, who shares in their baptism, who gave us this sacrament and the command to baptize. Over time, these girls will be able to claim Jesus' name and Jesus' promise for themselves: God saves. God-with-us. This morning they will be given the same name that Jesus was given: Beloved Child of God. These girls are beloved daughters, not just of their own family gathered here. Not just daughters of this family of faith gathered around them. Today God claims them as God's own beloved children. And that claim can never be taken away from them.

One more thing to say about baptism this morning. In so many ways our world wants us to name ourselves according to what we look like, or what language we speak, or what brands of clothing we wear, or coffee we drink or car we drive. In so many ways, we are tempted to identify ourselves only with other people who look like we do, who speak the same language we speak, or who purchase the same brand of clothing, coffee or car. It's an insidious temptation. And once you've taken that step, to become part of that group, it's so easy to take the next step and decide that someone who doesn't look like you, or speak your language, or purchase the same brands of clothing, coffee or car – that those people are not as good as you, that they are your enemy, deserving of your hatred, or at the very least your pity.

Baptism is the opposite of all that. Baptism negates all that. Baptism is not about joining a club or even about joining a church. Baptism is about God's claim on you, about God's delight with you. Baptism is about God's name for you: Beloved child. Baptism is

about God giving you an identity and a purpose and a family story that goes way beyond your flesh-and-blood relatives. Baptism is not what you do. It is NOT about whether you accept Jesus Christ as your savior. Baptism is what God does. Baptism is about the power of the Holy Spirit to make something entirely new, to create new life out of this water, to break through into your life and bring you into God's own presence.

God saves. God-with-us.

Baptism is not to be taken lightly. It is not a magic ritual. This is no placid pool. This is powerful stuff, this baptismal water. This is the power of God to destroy sin and death. This is the power of God's grace made real. This is the power of God's own name, given to you on the day that you were baptized, given to Sophie and Harper and Audrey today.

Beloved. Child of God. Come to the water and live.