

Named and Claimed
Isaiah 43:1-7

“John William Strelan! John William Strelan!”

You know what that meant, don't you?

Not just, “John!” or even “John Strelan!” but “John *William* Strelan!”

It meant I was in trouble. It meant I was being ‘named and claimed’. It didn't help, though, that my mother always said it with a smile in her voice, like she was aware of being a cliché!

Have you done that to your kids? Or had it done to you by your parents? It's interesting, isn't it, what a difference using the full name makes? It's all to do with authority and ownership. It's like saying: “You'd better pay attention now, I'm the one who *gave* you your name, and by using it I'm making sure you know who's the boss! You're answerable to me!”

It was never a nice feeling getting into trouble, but I knew the discipline my parents used was only the flip-side of the love they showed me. If I didn't know their love, to be named and claimed like that would have been terrifying. But, because I knew their love I knew where I belonged . . . I knew that someone cared about me . . . I knew I was safe and secure . . . and to be named and claimed . . . even in that instance, was a reassurance.

But, did you ever dare try it the other way around? I don't think I was ever brave enough! You know . . . use your parent's full name to get their attention!

Naming and claiming works when the person doing the naming actually has the authority to do it. It doesn't work the other way around . . . and yet, so often we try to do it to God . . . we name him in a way that suggests we're the one who calls the shots . . . that he'd better listen to us . . . or else . . . I'm not quite sure what the ‘or else’ would be . . . what threat we could make that would frighten him . . . but, we try it anyway.

But, we have no authority to claim God as our own . . . no ability to manipulate him to our will.

It's not we who name and claim God . . . it's God who names and claims us.

And, that's what Isaiah is on about in this text. He reminds us what this relationship with God is all about.

We are not alone in the world . . . left to our own devices . . . given total freedom to do and act as we please. How terrifying would that be, really?

No, we belong to God. “I called you by name”, he says, “You are mine.” It means we are answerable to someone . . . but, it also means there's someone who cares about us, who watches out for us and who loves us. God has claimed us as his own. And, what right does he have to do that? Well, he's the one who created us; he's the one who formed us in our mother's womb.

It's a shame we human beings so often assume the relationship works the other way around.

It's us who tell *God* what to do. It's us who dictate when life begins and when it ends. It's us who are so intelligent we can do anything.

If God were just a social worker, or welfare officer, he'd probably throw us in the too hard basket and find some easier clients.

But, thankfully, he has a greater stake in our lives. He's our heavenly Father. So, sometimes, just like any parent, God will call us by name in order to discipline us. But, even when he does that, he does it because he loves us. And, we know his love . . . through Jesus we know his love . . . his amazing, self-giving love . . . so we don't have to be afraid of God . . . when he names and claims us.

That's what Isaiah is all talking about . . . God calls us by name, not only to discipline, but to give us good news. "Do not be afraid!" he says. "Don't be afraid, because I have redeemed you. I've rescued you. I saved you. You belong to me and I'll never let you go."

Because we belong to God – because he has named and claimed us – we enjoy the privileges of being part of his family. We have the promise of his protection.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

In a poetic way, this sums up our whole lives. We know about the destructive nature of water and fire, particularly here in Australia. Both water and fire can be destructive forces of chaos reflecting the struggles and tragedies that confront us throughout our lives. But, God works even in the chaos and struggles. We were given life through water – through the water of baptism. And when we live in our baptism, everyday is a drowning of our old nature and a putting on of the new creation God has made us. Even though life may throw up plenty of challenges and pain, every day through the waters of baptism we are assured of God's promise of protection.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers with fire; the Holy Spirit continues to burn like fire in our hearts – inspiring us and purifying us so we can hang on to God's promises no matter what confronts us. God's serious about his promises! How serious? Well, he sacrificed the life of his own son, so he could give life to his adopted children. That's how serious he is about keeping his promises.

So, if God is willing to claim us as his own and give us his protection, we must be valuable to him. We must be precious to him. And we are! It doesn't matter who we are, or what we've done, each and every single person God has ever created is valuable in his sight.

So often we measure our value by the job we do, or the qualifications we have. So, when we meet someone for the first time, the question we ask almost straight away is: "What do you do?" We're a lot less comfortable asking the question God would ask: "Who are you?" Because we are all creatures of God's creativity, our value is not measured by what we do, but by who we are, and as Isaiah reminds us, we are children of God. And, as God's children we are valued, honoured and loved by him.

When everyone else says: "You're ugly, you're useless, you're too old . . . you're boring . . . you're stupid . . . you're worthless" . . . when we say that about ourselves . . . God says: "You are beautiful!" Can you believe that? It's hard isn't it?

But, our value to God doesn't come from the way we look . . . or the job we do . . . or the qualifications we have, or the value others place on us. Our value comes because we are God's children whom he loves. When he looks at us he sees beyond the surface appearance – he sees even beyond our sinful, disobedient hearts, he sees us as the new creation we are in Christ. That's why he can say to us: "You are beautiful. I love you."

We have been named and we have been claimed.

So, as you go home today, take with you God's word in your heart. He says:

I created you.

I formed you.

I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name. You are mine.

You are precious and honoured.

I love you.

I am with you.

Always.

Pastor John Strelan
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley
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