

# CALLED BY NAME

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*ISAIAH 43:1-7; ACTS 8:14-17*  
*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*  
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Over my seven or so years as a pastor, I have regularly noticed how what's going on in the world, in the life of the church, and in my own life have a profound impact on what stands out to me in a given passage of Scripture on a given week, and on what direction my sermon will tend to go.

This week has been a special week in the life of our church. On Tuesday, we had a memorial service for Dave Goertzen, one of our oldest members. It was a good opportunity to celebrate a "good life."

An hour before the service, I received the news that our Syrian friends would *finally* be arriving this week.

And so, on a bitterly cold Friday afternoon at the Lethbridge airport, eight of the nine people that our church has played an important role in bringing to Canada took their first steps of their new life (the mother of the two men will be arriving next week – perhaps Wednesday or Thursday)!

We have been waiting for this arrival for a very long time, as a committee and as a church.

It's a relief to finally have these families here. It's taken a lot of work from a lot of people to get them here and to prepare a house, clothing, toys, and many other essential items to greet them.

But in many ways, this is more of a beginning than an ending of anything. Now we begin the even more important work of walking with them as they make their way in this strange new land. We begin the work of surrounding them as a community, loving their

kids, helping them navigate systems and processes that will likely seem quite strange to them.

I chose the Scriptures for this Sunday *before* I received word that our families would be arriving this week – before I knew that the rest of my week would be dominated by this happy arrival.

And so when I sat down yesterday with these two passages again, I couldn't help but read them with the experience of this week's welcome in mind.

The texts for this Sunday could quite easily lead to more seasonal Epiphany themes about the baptism of Jesus.

However today I want us to reflect upon them with themes of “insider” and “outsider” in mind—themes about what it means to be chosen and called by name, and what these designations are meant to lead to.

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In our first text, Isaiah speaks words of comfort to exiles in Babylon. Two things came to mind as I read this passage.

First, we encounter the important truth that each one of us is chosen and called by God, that we are dearly loved, that when we pass through hard times, God will guide and sustain us.

This passage from Isaiah was, of course, originally spoken to a whole people group. But it can be read in deeply personal ways, too.

Second, though, perhaps we are a bit uneasy with the language of “I give people/nations in return for you” (Isa. 43:3-4).

Is this not exactly what the world needs *less* of? Is not the idea of one group of people convinced that they matter more than others or that God is more interested in them than other people what's causing so many problems in the world?

And doesn't God love those Ethiopians and Egyptians? What about that children's song we always sing...

*Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world  
Red and yellow, black, and white, they are precious in his sight*

Is Isaiah saying that God chooses some and not others? That God loves some and not others? That God is interested in the salvation of some and not others?

Is being “chosen” and dearly loved by God an invitation into a life of jealously guarded privilege where we can celebrate our status as God’s favourites?

It must be acknowledged that there are many passages in Scripture – particularly in the OT—that can be read in this way. It seems that the people of Israel *did*, at times, think of themselves in this way.

There is an us/them mentality that seems virtually hard-wired into us as human beings, and this is certainly reflected in the Scriptures of the people of Israel.

But if we take seriously the idea that Scripture is *more* than just a reflection of human self-understanding and understanding of God—that these sacred texts are *inspired* records of God’s self-disclosure to human beings over time—then we must also acknowledge that God *did* choose one people out of all the others.

We see this throughout the OT. One example (among many) comes from Deuteronomy 7:7:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

Throughout the OT, from the calling of Abraham in Genesis 12 to the genealogy that opens the first chapter of Matthew’s gospel, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the Creator God of heaven and earth is also the God who chooses the people of Israel to be his special possession.

The question is why.

Why does God choose? Why does God choose Israel and, later, the church?

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It is here that we turn to our second passage from Acts. It's a short passage, a brief account of one event in the life of the early church.

But to make sense of it properly, we need to pay attention to its wider context.

In Acts 1, at the ascension of Jesus, he departs with these words: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So, with this in mind, we read the first sentence of our text from Acts:

*Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.*

It's really easy to slide by this sentence without noticing how important it actually is. It's important because it shows that the good news of Christ is being accepted.

But it's also important because of who is doing the accepting. Samaria.

*Samaria.*

The Samaritans were close neighbours of the Jews but were generally despised and looked down for a number of historical reasons going back to the dividing of the kingdom after Solomon, and the creation of two nations in place of one.

To make a long story short, the general view of Samaritans was that they were traitors who couldn't be trusted as well as illegitimate heirs of God's promises.

They were outsiders. Not chosen. Not dearly loved. At least that was how the thinking went.

But Acts tells us that it is **these people** in **this place** that accept the word of God about Jesus. The outsider *Samaritans* are now on the same footing as the insider Jews in this new thing called the church that is being born!

This shouldn't have been much of a surprise.

We know that throughout his ministry Jesus had this inconvenient way of upending his people's understandings of Samaritans, whether in his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well or, more famously, with the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the hated enemy shows the religious insider what love of neighbour looks like.

And now, the church that bore Jesus' name was moving in the same direction: away from "chosenness as a mark of privilege" toward "chosenness as an invitation to blessing the other."

In our passage from Isaiah, we hear of Israel's God exchanging other nations for his people in the promise to restore them from exile.

In our passage from Acts, we see a glorious reversal.

**Now, we see Israel being given for the nations. Israel's Messiah was now becoming the Saviour of the world, beginning with Samaria, and, eventually, extending to the ends of the earth.**

This was foretold way back in Genesis 12.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; **and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

The blessing of Israel was *never* meant to be for Israel alone. It was always meant to be the means through which "all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

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As I reflected on these two passages, and as I thought about our welcome of new friends from Syria this week, it struck me in a new way that this "blessed to be a blessing" theme is a primary movement in story of Scripture.

The circle is always widening. From family (Abraham)... to nation (Israel)... to multi-ethnic church (Paul's missionary journeys)... to the ends of the earth (the church ever since!).

This is who God is and this is what God does. This is what we see in the life and ministry of Jesus, this is what we see in the birth of the church, this is what we have seen throughout history.

It is also a primary movement in the life of faith.

We are always faced with a choice. For some people, the life of faith is primarily about my status with God.

This might be a very appropriate starting point. For those who perhaps struggle with trying to earn God's favour, or who question whether they could ever be accepted by God, or who are facing struggles in life that seem impossible to bear, the news that they are called, chosen, and dearly loved is indescribably welcome and desperately necessary.

We *need* to know that God is on our side. We *need* to know that God will walk with us through the storms of life. We *need* to know that even when we have wandered far from God, that God will not abandon us.

We *need* to hear Isaiah's words addressed to us personally: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

But as followers of Jesus we don't stop here. We don't stop with *me* and *my God* or even with *my people* and *our God*.

We are always invited to extend blessing, love, and hospitality outward.

For Israel, for the early church, for us, **blessing is never a possession meant to be hoarded.**

In the life of faith, "I have called you by name" is *always* an invitation to extend blessing to others.

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And this is what I have experienced this week as we welcomed new friends from Syria.

A year ago, our church decided to act upon our conviction that blessing was not something to be hoarded and kept to ourselves. We decided that we who had received much—materially and spiritually—had an obligation to extend blessing outward.

And so, we decided to partner with other churches in Lethbridge to open our doors, to make room for people coming out of a desperate situation.

Now, these new friends are among us. We have an opportunity to continue to widen the circle, to expand, to extend a welcome to bless and to be blessed by people from a context very different from our own.

On Friday, we had the opportunity to share a lovely meal with these families when we brought them to their new home. It was a wonderful mixture of people—our new Syrian friends, people from the sponsoring churches, Muslim friends who helped with translation and preparing a glorious meal!

It was a visual embodiment, for me at least, of this vital truth that blessing and being “called” by God are always invitations outward—to open our arms and our minds and our hearts to the “other,” whether it’s an ethnic “other” or a religious “other” or an economic “other” or *any* kind of other.

This week I have been reminded that the people of God have always been in the blessing business. At least this has always been the idea, however badly people have done this.

We can bless people in at least two importantly inter-related ways.

We can share the good news of Jesus Christ—news of repentance, healing, forgiveness, new life, salvation; inviting people to be a part of this community called together and enlivened by Christ, sharing the good news that we are *all* called by name, summoned to be reconciled to our Creator through the finished work of Jesus.

Loving our neighbours as ourselves, as we have been commanded by Christ; loving unconditionally, with no strings attached, in concrete acts of meeting the needs of neighbours, whether from down the street or from around the world.

We can, in other words, be people who proclaim, in word and deed and all of who we are, the good news that we are *all* loved by God.

May God help us to always be seeking to participate in this primary movement of faith. We are blessed, called, and chosen in order to extend this blessing, calling, and chosenness to others.

May God help us to always be seeking to widen the circle of love to the most unlikely places and people. And may God train our hearts and minds, our eyes and ears to receive blessing from others, too.

Amen.

