

March 1, I am flying off to Germany. This time, it won't just be vacation. Nor will it be Continuing Ed. I am going there to baptize my cousin's baby boy, Fiete. He will be baptized in the same church where his mother was baptized...and his grandfather...and his great grandfather...and who knows how many other ancestors, for the church is over 600 years old. In the wall, there's even a cannonball from the Thirty Year's War! And the baptismal font is even older. It's not much to look at, this baptismal font. It's just a big rock, hollowed out some, with a silver bowl. But standing there, like countless pastors before me, I will welcome this child into God's family through water and the Word: *“Fiete Wilhelm Dolberg, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”* As I do this, God will also have something to say – a Word of promise; a Word of assurance – just as He has for countless others before Fiete; just as He has for each of us. And what will that Word be? In essence, the words of our text: **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are Mine.”**

Of course, for me the big day will soon be over. But for Fiete, Baptism will just be the beginning. In fact, as his parents raise him in the Christian faith, as he learns about God and His Word, Fiete will have some important questions to ask:

- What does it mean, this promise of God – that He has redeemed me, called me by name, made me His own?
- And can I believe this promise of God? Not just in theory. In everyday life. Can I depend on this promise? Can I count on this promise? Can I even stake my life on it? Just how firm is this promise of God?

Yes, how firm?! For the promise will be tested, won't it? There's no telling how or when or where, but it will be tested. In fact, life will test it repeatedly – perhaps with sorrow or with pleasure; perhaps with failure or success; perhaps with hardship or with leisure. Who knows? But the testing will come! So as Fiete grows up, he will need to figure out: just how real is this Christian faith, just how reliable is this triune God, just how firm is this divine promise: **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are Mine.”**

That's something we all need to figure out, isn't it? To quote the familiar hymn, we all need to figure out *how firm a foundation is laid for our faith in God's excellent Word*. Yes, how firm?! For if God's promise is just like any other promise, it may be firm or may not be. These days, advertisers make big promises for their products. But are they real, are they reliable, are they firm? Politicians make big promises in order to get elected. But are they real, are they reliable, are they firm? Not always. Even at the baptismal font, parents make big promises about raising their kids in the Christian faith. But are they real, are they reliable, are they firm? Not always. So is the same true for God's promise? Can I really count on Him to be for me what He's promised to be; and do for me what He's promised to do? That is definitely something we need to figure out!

For these days, isn't that precisely what some people complain about – that God isn't reliable? Or put another way, that religion doesn't work? And we all know why they say this. Maybe someone prayed and prayed, but God didn't do what they asked. Someone did lots of good things, but God didn't reward them. Someone followed all the rules, but they still had struggles. So they concluded religion doesn't work. God isn't reliable. His promises aren't all that firm.

But is that really the case? Or is it more a question of expectations? Because you know, God isn't required to meet all our expectations! He never promised to do that! Nor did He promise that life would always go smoothly! In fact, looking through the Bible, I can't think of anyone whose life always went smoothly – including Jesus', who certainly prayed and prayed, and did good things, and followed all the rules! In the Bible, troubles are assumed. Why, even in our text, written for people in exile, troubles are assumed. What are the terms of the promise? “***When* you pass through the waters, I will be with you; *when* you pass through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; *when* you walk through fire you will not be burned, and the flame will not consume you.**” Troubles are assumed! But that doesn't keep God from telling His people, “**Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are Mine.**” And that doesn't keep them from judging Him faithful! So with all due respect, fair is fair! The question to ask is not: Does God meet my expectations? The question to ask is: Does God keep His promises? *How firm a foundation is laid for our faith in God's excellent Word?* Yes, how firm?

Now to answer that, we need to know what God has actually promised. We need to know and apply His Word. So just for practice, let's look more closely at the Word of promise in our text.

First, God tells each of us, “**I have redeemed you...**” And isn't that true? Two-thousand years ago, on a hill called Calvary, Jesus – God in the flesh – took all our sins upon Himself, and He paid the price of our redemption with His own blood. He didn't just redeem some of us from some of our sins. No matter who we are or what we've done, Jesus paid the price in full! And He doesn't just offer redemption to those who seem deserving – those who pray and pray, for instance, or do good things, or follow all the rules. No, His promise is clear: “**Whoever hears my Word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment but has already passed from death to life.**” So is this first promise firm? You bet! The promise is rock-solid! We can depend on it, count on it, even stake our lives on God's promise: “**I have redeemed you...**”

Next, God tells each of us: “**I have called you by name...**” And isn't that true? Specifically, when God called us into His family through Baptism, wasn't it “**by name**”? Yes, it was! And why was that? Because redemption is not generic. It's individual. It's personal. God loves each of us as if there were only one of us to love. God knows each of us down to the number of hairs on our head. When

Jesus died for us, He carried each of us personally on His heart. And when He bestowed His grace upon us in Baptism, He did it **“by name.”** There is a good reason why we don’t just baptize a crowd with a fire hose or toss them in a pool of holy water and call it good! One by one, we baptize each person **“by name,”** because that fits the way God works. As Luther put it in the Catechism: *“The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...”* Not just people in general. Not just *“the elect.”* Individuals. You and me! Each of us can say, *“He has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified me and kept me in the true faith...”* To God, we are not just ciphers in the Book of Life. We’re each an individual with a name. And when we arrive in heaven, He will welcome us **“by name.”** So is this promise firm? You bet! This promise is rock-solid, too! We can depend on it, count on it, even stake our lives on God’s promise: **“I have called you by name...”**

Then, last but not least, God tells each of us, **“You are mine.”** And isn’t that true? Certainly it is by virtue of creation. God made us. God sustains us. In that sense, everyone belongs to God. But for you and me, it’s true in an even deeper sense because of our redemption. And what a difference it makes to experience this truth in our heart of hearts – God’s assurance: **“You are mine!”**

I wish you could have known a dear, dear soul named Marsha Hunt. She died in 2008, but if anyone could tell you what difference it makes to finally experience **“you are Mine,”** it was Marsha! I will never forget the first time I met her. It was Easter morning. She and her niece, Lori, were dressed to the nines, and afterward she asked about Lori being baptized. I had a Basic Belief class coming up, so that was no problem. But what I did not realize was how big a step this was for Marsha.

You see, up to this point her religious experience had not been very positive. She lost her mother at an early age. When her father remarried, it was to a very attractive socialite – one who was a vain to the point of cruelty. You see, Marsha was not attractive, and this stepmother despised her for that very reason. In fact, she treated her like an embarrassment. And as for the new stepbrothers, they treated her even more shamefully, like dirt beneath their feet. So you get the picture. Oh, and did I tell you the stepfamily was also quite active in church? So now you really get the picture! Abandonment, abuse, while being forced to go through the motions – for Marsha, that’s what “religion” had amounted to.

Still, Marsha was Lutheran enough to value Baptism – value it for her niece. That’s what brought her to our church. But once there, she found something she had not expected – that we would value *her*. A couple of our younger women took her under their wing. Basically, they adopted her like a sister. When Lori was baptized, they made a big deal of it. When Marsha turned 50, they threw a big party. Little by little, Marsha felt like a member of the family. And experiencing that love led her to take another look at her faith. In time, she was able to separate religion from her stepfamily; separate God from her negative

experience. With more time, she was able to connect with God in a positive way she never had experienced before. And with even more time, she was able to reach out to people herself and offer them the same love and support she had received. It was really amazing, this change in Marsha!

But I mentioned the difference it made to experience “**you are Mine!**” In June a year ago, Marsha wound up in the hospital with serious medical problems. I kept in touch by phone, and one day we had a really good talk – about her faith journey. She said the moment things really clicked for her spiritually was after a Bible study where someone had made the point: who you are grows out of whose you are. It was as if God said then and there, “**Let there be light!**” Marsha realized: *I am not my stepmother’s embarrassment! I am not my stepbrothers’ punching bag! I am not my boss’s slave girl! I am not my niece’s cash cow! That’s not who I am, because that’s not Whose I am! I am Marsha Hunt, child of God! No one can take that away from me. No one can separate me from His love. No one!*

Talk about feeling “**redeemed**” – and not just from her own sins but from the sins inflicted upon her! Talk about feeling “**called by name**” – finally, she was “Marsha Hunt, child of God!” And talk about feeling God’s embrace; God telling her, “**You are Mine!**” This had always been true, of course – true since the day of her Baptism – but what a difference it made to experience it! What a difference to be able to live and to die with God’s assurance, “**You are Mine!**”

So *how firm a foundation is laid for our faith in God’s excellent Word?* Marsha Hunt would say: *It’s 100% firm!* One day, I hope little Fiete will say: *It’s 100% firm.* And that is also my prayer for each of us. No life is smooth and trouble-free. God never promised it would be. But God does promise us the grace and power to deal with life, the wisdom and guidance to make it through, a glorious eternity at the end of the road, and unconditional love each step of the way. That was the promise at our Baptism. That *is* the promise we take home with us today – the promise in God’s excellent Word: “**Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are Mine!**” Amen.