

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Isa. 62:1-5

Recently, I have been thinking about names and naming. And, as is so often the case, sooner or later we run into Shakespeare when we deal with the English language. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by another name would smell just as sweet,” the playwright muses in *Romeo and Juliet*. Which means, no matter which label or name we attach to something or someone, it does not change the essence, beauty and dignity of a thing or a person.

We can also not avoid the naming issue when it comes to reading the biblical text. There, we have to come to terms with the fact that we do not get to name anything. Rather, God has all the naming rights and privileges—except for Adam, who had special, albeit limited, divine dispensation. God names and often re-names as God sees fit in significant ways: Abram becomes Abraham, the father of many nations. After wrestling with the divine presence, Jacob becomes Israel—the one who circumvents and supplants turns into the one who becomes a champion for God.

And then there is the naming issue in the book of Isaiah. In chapter 43, we read, and we will later recite together as our *Affirmation of Faith*: “But now, thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

What a powerful, what a wondrous thing to hear God speak through the mouth of the prophet: “I have called you by name. You are mine. I am the Lord your God, your savior.” God lays claim on the Israelites by simply naming them. And this name not only secures their identity but also their salvation as God establishes a covenant relationship with God, creation, and one another.

However, these words of assurance with which the prophet consoles the nation of Israel don’t have a lasting effect. When the Israelites are thrust into exile,

they receive a new name by God. Now, they are called *Forsaken*, and the land in which they live is called *Desolate*. How quickly things change.

I am comforted to read the assuring words of the prophet Isaiah again today. It is good to be reminded that God has called each and every one of us by name, that we indeed belong to God who saves us all. But I am also uneasy with this promise. Uneasy because, like the Israelites, our blessings and our identity have been rattled, perhaps even shattered, by a pandemic exile into which we have been thrust more than two years ago. Granted, we have not lost our homeland, but the firm ground we believed to have stood on has most definitely shifted, and is shifting still.

If there ever were a “normal”—and I do not have a clue what “normal” might actually mean—it is certainly no more. And I wonder.... What is our name now? Has it changed from *Blessed* to *Forsaken*? From *Privileged* to *Desolate*? Whatever our current name might be, I think it’s safe to say that we have been knocked off balance and are not sure how to regain it.

What concerns me is that we as individuals, as well as a society, or as politicians, have devolved at times into calling each other names, as if that would make the current situation any better. And names matter—they can affirm or wound, unite or divide. The childhood adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” comes to mind. Personally, I am not proud when I recall some of the names I have attached to people over my lifetime, if only in my head or, worse, in my heart.

So, when it comes to naming or calling someone a name, we would do well to keep two things in mind. First, even when we call each other names, we will never be able to strip somebody’s essence, beauty or dignity away. Nor will name-calling alter any given situation. It simply reflects poorly on us when we do. Second, we would do well to leave the naming up to God because only God knows the purpose for our lives.

Which brings us back to the prophet Isaiah. Israel’s exile lasted a long time, but it did not last forever. Eventually, they got to return home. But they did not get

to return to what used to be “normal” for them. Instead, as they are about to return, they receive a new name from the God of their ancestors:

“The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed *Forsaken*, and your land shall no more be termed *Desolate*; but you shall be called *My Delight Is in Her*.”

When we will re-emerge from our pandemic exile, where will we go? There will not be a “former normal” nor will there be a “new normal.” What I do know is that we, too, will receive a new name from God. But what will it be? Will we also be called *A Crown of Beauty in the Hand of the Lord, A Royal Diadem in the Hand of the Lord, and My Delight is in You*? I would image that in order to receive such names, many things will have to change. It has to change how we treat one another, especially the “least among us.” We will have to stop calling each other names and demean one another. The arc of the moral universe will finally have to bend toward justice for all, not just for some. And the beloved community in which all of creation is seen as precious must become a reality and not just a dream. Just yesterday, we were shockingly reminded once again how easily name calling can cross over into violence, when a deranged individual took hostages in a synagogue in Coveyville, Tx.

It is important to say again and again that we do not get to name ourselves, nor do we get to name others. That has been, is, and ever will be God’s prerogative and privilege. We will simply have to wait and see which name God assigns to us. And it is important to remember that even Jesus did not get to pick his own name. Nor did his parents. Mary is told by the angel Gabriel what to name her first born son—Jesus, the one who will save his people. Jesus—Son of God, Savior—was not only his name but also his calling according to God’s purpose.

But, more importantly, Jesus’s name and calling is confirmed when he submits to being baptized by John. As he emerges from the waters of the Jordan, the heavens are torn asunder and we hear God confirm his name, his true name that is: “This is my son, the *Beloved*. With him I am well pleased.” *Beloved*, and *Well-Pleased* is Jesus’s true name, a name that echoes God’s ancient promise we

already heard through the words of the prophet Isaiah: “I have called you by name. You are mine!”

Last week we celebrated *Baptism of the Lord Sunday*. And as we did so, we had the opportunity to remember our own baptism as we baptized and welcomed Olivia Joy into God’s household. Before Mel applied the water on Olivia’s forehead and spoke the trinitarian words, she asked Olivia, “What is your Christian name?” *Olivia Joy*, she said. But Olivia’s Christian name, our Christian name, bears witness to a much deeper reality than the names our parents assigned to us. Our names bear witness to Isaiah’s ancient words on God’s behalf: “I have called you by name. You are mine. I am the Lord, your God, your Savior.”

As for living up to our Christian name ... that’s a goal worth striving toward. In case we forget, like Jesus each of us received a name at our baptism. Each of us is called *Beloved Child of God* and *With You I Am Well Pleased*. What’s in a name? The promise of God’s eternal love for each and every one of us.

May it be so, for you and for me.

Amen.