

Naming Jesus, and Being Named

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Today's sermon is about naming Jesus and being named.

Names are important in the realm of the spirit. In the Bible people are often re-named as they encounter God. Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai, Sarah, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul, and Mary is told to name her son Jesus, which means God Saves.

In many religions the naming of a baby is accompanied by a spiritual ceremony. When a monk or nun enters a religious order they are given a new name.

Names are powerful. Frederick Buechner describes one of his dreams:

I dream I am sitting down. I am sitting on a stool of a bar, and my glass has left a wet ring on the wooden countertop. With my finger, I start to move the wet around. I move it this way and that....And then on the smooth counter of a bar I write a name. When I have finished writing it I start to weep, and the tears wake me up. I cannot remember the name I wrote, but I know that it was a name I would be willing to die for. Maybe it was the

secret name of God, or the secret name of the world. Maybe it was my own secret name. The dream is only a dream, but the tears are exceedingly real.¹

I

As our text begins John the Baptist points his disciples to Jesus and says, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Just before he had exclaimed, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

The image resonated deeply in the Jewish soul. The sacrificial lamb, the Passover lamb whose blood on the doorposts helped them pass over from death to life, from slavery to freedom. The lamb as God’s Suffering Servant, like a lamb led to slaughter, by whose stripes we are healed.

The deepest theological language is symbolic, poetic, metaphorical. It points to the truth. To use a Buddhist image: it is the finger pointing to the moon, not the moon. I used to have a dog named Maggie. I would try to point her to something on the other side of the yard. “Look!” I’d say. But she fastened her eyes on my finger, not on where I was pointing. Religious language points beyond itself to the Mystery that is God. Literalism focuses on the finger.

II

Upon hearing these words John's disciples decide to go look for themselves. Jesus asks them: "What do you seek?" What are you looking for?

They side step the question, *Rabbi*, or Teacher, they call him. John is introducing us to names for Jesus. The multiplicity of names preserves the mystery. One name for Jesus is liable to turn into a idol. First *Lamb of God*, now *Rabbi, Teacher*.

"Rabbi, Teacher", they ask, where are you staying?" Where do you come from? Where is your abode? Every conversation in John is multi-layered. Often we are on one level, the most superficial, and Jesus is on another, deeper level.

"Where are you staying?" they ask. But their question reaches more deeply than they know. Where do you come from? It is something deeper than where he is spending the night. It is about where he abides spiritually; not where he hangs his hat, but where he hangs his soul.

So Jesus' answer isn't: "I'm down at the Holiday Inn", or "I'm at Sarah and Judah's house." He answers with an invitation: "Come and see." Earlier in John we are told that Jesus resides at the breast of God, close to the heart of God (1:18). This is his true residence.

Where are you staying?

Close to the heart of God.

Where is that?

Come and see.

“Come and see” means to journey with Jesus long enough to know him.

Dabblers in religion do not stay long enough on any journey to be changed. Jesus wants to change us from tourists to disciples.

“Come and see” is the invitation to stay long enough to be grasped by the Divine. John’s two disciples decide to hang around for awhile. One of them is Andrew, Simon’s brother. He goes to his brother and says, “We’ve found the *Messiah*, or the Christ, John explains. The Hebrew word *Messiah* means Anointed. The Greek word is *Christ*. So Lamb of God, Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah, Christ, Anointed One.

Jesus looks at Andrew’s brother Simon and names, or renames him on the spot. “So you are Simon son of John? You shall be called Cephas”, the Aramaic for rock. In the Greek, Peter. Peter would not always be a rock. At a key moment he became Sand or PlayDough. But Jesus gave him a name to live up to: Rock.

Does Christ have a secret name for you? Deeper than your given name? What would you like it to be? The book of Revelation says that at the Final Judgment we will be given a smooth white stone with a name on it. Perhaps our own secret name.

III

The next day Jesus goes to Galilee and finds a man named Phillip. “Follow me” he says. Phillip goes and finds Nathaniel and calls Jesus by another name. It is like a Native American name which is a string of names. We have found, he says: *The-One-About-Whom-Moses-Wrote-In-The-Law-And-The-Prophets*. In other words: *The-One-We’ve-Been-Waiting-For*.

Then Phillip identifies Jesus to Nathaniel: “He’s Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph from Nazareth.” Nathaniel responds with skepticism: “Can anything good come out of *Nazareth*?!” That hole-in-the-wall village in Galilee. Our tradition says nothing about a Messiah from Nazareth! We can be prejudiced about places.

Phillip does not argue, but invites. “Come and see!” True evangelism is not argumentation but invitation. Come and see.

When Nathaniel meets Jesus, Jesus gives him a name, a multi-word name: *Behold-A-True-Israelite-In-Whom-There-Is-No-Guile*. In other words: No

Deceit. Was Jesus affirming Nathaniel by saying, in effect: “He questions, but he has honest questions.”

Then Nathaniel asks, “How do you know me?” Jesus replies in effect: “I’ve been watching you.” Nathaniel then offers his own name for Jesus, a string of names: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God, King of Israel.*”

Jesus replies:

You will see even more. “Truly, truly I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

The Son of Man is Jesus’ most frequent name for himself, a name so mysterious, scholars still debate its meaning. Jesus combines the name with a famous Old Testament dream. Remember Jacob’s dream, a ladder spanning heaven and earth, bathed in the most glorious light, with angels ascending and descending, and a Voice saying: “Be not afraid, I will be with you always.” And Jacob said, “Surely the Lord is in this place.” It is what people experience when they meet Jesus: Surely the Lord is in this place. Jacob named the place Bethel—which means House of God. Later he named it Gate of Heaven, for surely he had been shown heaven’s own gate. So here are the last two names for Jesus, beautiful and suggestive names: Jacob’s ladder and Gate of Heaven.

Yes, a Ladder and a Gate, and not just out there but *in here* too. He is the ladder within us reaching the divine, heaven's gate inside opening us to the Divine. It is like a beautiful dream.

IV

What might Christ's name be for you. Surely *Beloved*, and *Child of God*, maybe his own name, *Christ*.

And what about our names for Jesus? Do you have any special names, heart-names? Today's text gives us these:

Lamb of God

Rabbi, Teacher

Messiah, Christ

One About Whom Moses and the Prophets Wrote

Jesus of Nazareth

Son of God

King of Israel

Jacob's Ladder

Heaven's Gate

Son of Man

V

Muslim and Sufi spirituality has ninety-nine names for God. The ninety-nine describe the character of God, but they also suggest an infinity of names. God is always more. And again, multiplicity preserves mystery.

So I set about last year to find ninety-nine names for Jesus. They come from the Bible, sacred poetry, hymns, liturgy and mystical experiences of Jesus through the ages. They are in roughly alphabetical order. “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing My Great Redeemer’s Praise”. Here they are:

Abba’s Child

Alpha and Omega

Anointed One

Balm of Gilead

Beautiful Savior

Beloved

Blossom, Dawn, Dew on the Grass

Bread of Life

Bridegroom

Brother

Center

Christ

Cup of Forgiveness

Darling Jesus

Deliverer

Door

Dreamer

Emmanuel, Immanuel, God-with-us

Exiled King

Fairest of Ten Thousand

Forgotten Revelation

Friend

Friend of Outcasts and Sinners

Friend of the Poor

Fully Human One

Gardener

Gate of Heaven

God's Favorite Story

Good Shepherd

Great Physician

Heaven's Harmonies, God's Song

Hope of the Hopeless

Humanity of God

Icon, or Image of God

Ihidaya, Single One, Unified One, Integrated One

Inner Light

Jesus, *Yeshua* (Which means "Yahweh saves")

Jesus of Nazareth

Joy of our Desiring

King of Kings

King of My Heart

Lamb of God

Last of the Great Detectives

Liberator

Light of the World

Lily of the Valley

Living Water

Lord

Lord of the Dance

Love Itself

Lover of My Soul

Love's Bitten Tongue, Heaven's Wound

Man of Sorrows

Mediator

Misfit

Model

Mother

My Great Dignity

My Sweet Lord

Mystery Made Flesh

Mystic River

One about Whom Moses and the Prophets Wrote

One Who Is Coming into the World

Parable of God

Peace, Peace of God, Prince of Peace

Pearl of Great Price

Pioneer, Trail-Blazer, Path-Finder

Ploughman Who becomes the Wheat, Winepress That Becomes the Wine

Poem of God

Presence of the Kingdom

Priest

Prophet

Rabbi

Radiance, Incendiary

Redeemer

Resurrection and the Life

Revealer, Revelator

Risen One, Living One

Sacrament of God

Savior

Second Adam

Servant

Servant of God

Servant of the Poor

Son of God

Son of man

Son of Mary, Joseph's Boy

Suffering Servant

Surprise of Mercy, Outgoing Gladness, Rescue, Healing and Life²

Symbol of God

Teacher

Treasure

Tree of Life

Vine

Volunteer

The Way, the Truth, the Life

Wisdom of God

Word of God

May the names and the naming never end.

1. Fredrick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (N.Y.: The Seabury Press, 1970), p. 21
2. George Butterick, *Prayer* (N.Y.: Abingdon Press, 1942), p. 83