

Naming and Being Named
John 1:35-51
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This passage is about something sacred: naming and being named. That is, naming Jesus and being named by him. There is something holy about a name. In many cultures, Christian and non-Christian, the naming of a child is a sacred ceremony. In African tradition the new-born hears its name first spoken as the father whispers his or her name in its ear. When a monk or nun enters a religious order they are given a new name. I've known adults who after a transformational change in their lives have altered their names.

Do you like your name? I know many who do not—and for a variety of reasons. My parents accidentally reversed my first and middle names on my birth certificate, which I did not know until I was 16. They were so excited and overwhelmed by the surprise birth of twins who arrived 6 weeks early that they wrote on the birth certificate Harold Stephen Shoemaker when what they meant to write was Stephen Harold Shoemaker. So thereafter when my name was called in school I was called Harold, and I meekly with some embarrassment would say, “I go by Steve.” And this: isn't it interesting that when someone mispronounces your name you feel like a little kid again?

I know some people who love their names. They have studied the meaning of them and said, “That name is who I am, and who I want to be.”

Do you think you might have a secret name given to you by God? I like to think so. And, then, throughout our lives we are seeking to discover our secret name, the name that unlocks the mystery of who we are at our deepest level.

So let’s look at this text today. It’s all about naming and being named.

I

John the Baptist was standing around with two of his disciples. He saw Jesus walking by and said aloud: “Behold the Lamb of God!” What can this name mean? It comes from the deepest places in the Hebrew psyche and memory. There was the *sacrificial lamb*, the *sin-bearing lamb*, the *Passover lamb* whose blood marked the doors of Hebrew homes and saved them the evening before they were rescued from slavery. So, Jesus the lamb who bears our sins and bears them away. Jesus the lamb whose blood takes away the sin of the world. Jesus the lamb who passes us over from death to life, from slavery to freedom. Behold the Lamb.

John’s two disciples hear his words and decide to follow Jesus and see what he is about. When Jesus sees them he asks, “What do you seek?” What are you looking for?

They answer, “Rabbi”, or teacher, the first name given him in the text. Then they ask, “Where are you staying?” In John’s gospel all language is multi-layered “Where are you staying?” is not about where he is spending the night but where he abides spiritually, not where he hangs his hat but where he hangs his soul.

Earlier in John we are told that Jesus has come from the breast of the Father. This is his primary abode. So Jesus does not say, “I’m at the Holiday Inn” or “I’m at Martha’s house”, or “I’m down by the bridge”. He says elusively, compellingly, “Come and see”,

Where are you staying?

Close to the heart-beat of God

Where is that?

Come and see.

One of the two is named Andrew, who happens to be the brother of Simon, whom we will come to call Peter. Andrew goes to Simon and says: “We have found the *Messiah!* First Jesus was called Rabbi, now something greater, *Messiah*. The name *Messiah* has been laden with all kinds of meanings through the centuries, some of which have nothing to do with who Jesus was. But literally, and at its deepest, the word means “Anointed One,” one who has been anointed to carry out God’s holy work in the world. The Greek word for this Hebrew word is *Christ*.

So Andrew takes his brother to see Jesus. Jesus looks at Simon and says:

So you are Simon, son of John. You shall be called Cephas (In Greek Peter).

The name meant Rock, which Peter would become for Jesus the rest of his life, except of course on the night of Jesus' arrest when the rock crumbled and Peter denied knowing him. We don't always live up to our names.

So we see a two-way naming going on. We are naming Jesus and he is giving us our true name, the name for the truest deepest part of ourselves.

II

The scene now shifts north, back to Galilee. There Jesus meets a person named Phillip and says to him, "Follow me." This is the truest meaning of being a Christian: being a follower of Jesus and his way.

What did Phillip do first as a follower of Jesus? He went to find his friend Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus! This is how Phillip described him, named him. It is like a Native American named with several words strung together. He is, Phillip said, "The-One-About-Whom-Moses-and-the-Prophets-Wrote." In the other words: "The-One-We've-Been-Looking-For." Then He added: And he is "Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth."

Nathaniel replies with incredulity: "What good can come out of Nazareth?" What good can come out of that hick town?! We do that sometimes, don't we?

Pre-judge someone based on where they come from. Fill in the blank: “What good can come out of _____?”

Phillip echoes Jesus’ words to Nathaniel, “Come and see.” In other words: You will learn who he is as you follow him.

Albert Schweitzer was the famous theologian, organist, Bach scholar. His book *The Quest Of The Historical Jesus* sparked the modern scholarly quest for the historical Jesus. But the scholarly quest was insufficient to know who Jesus was. Here is the final luminous paragraph:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side. He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.¹

We know him as we follow him. Years later Schweitzer decided to follow Jesus to Africa where he set up a hospital in Lambarene. He gave up his comfortable European university life and went to medical school. He wrote of this decision:

I wanted to be a doctor that I might be able to work without having to talk.
(I've felt like that some days.)

“For years”, he said, “I had been giving myself out in words.” Now he was putting his “religion of love” into practice.

We learn who he is in our following of him.

Toni Craver, Professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Bright Divinity School speaks about the elusive unpronounceable, untranslatable name God gave to Moses at the burning bush: *Yahweh*, actually a verb, not a noun. God was saying to Moses, she says: “Call me *Yahweh*, and if you follow me you will learn what it means.”

III

Soon after, Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him. He said, “Here is an Israelite in whom there is not guile (no deceit.)” Jesus was naming him: “What-you-see-is-what-you-get!” Nathaniel replied, “How do you know me?” Jesus said, in effect, “I’ve been watching you!”

The Nathaniel comes forth with two new names for Jesus: “*Rabbi*, you are the *Son of God*, you are *The King of Israel*.” And Jesus responded:

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

So here are the last three names for Jesus: Jacob's Ladder, Gate of Heaven, Son of Man.

Remember the story of Jacob? He had cheated his brother Esau out of birthright and blessing and had deceived his father Isaac. Now he was fleeing into the desert. That night as he slept under the stars a dream was given him. Of a golden ladder stretching from heaven to earth with angels ascending and descending. God's voice came to him and said,

I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Isaac. I will fulfill my promise to you and your descendants to make you a blessing to all the earth. Behold I will bless you wherever you go!

Instead of the Blessing Out he deserved he was given a Blessing. Instead of condemnation, "blessed assurance."

When he awoke he said,

Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it...This is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven.

And he named the place *Beth-el*, which means, "House of God".

So is Jesus "Jacob's ladder" and "Heaven's Gate."

In this story Jesus has been given *nine* names:

Lamb of God

Rabbi, or Teacher

Messiah, or Christ

The One We've Been Looking For

Jesus, son of Joseph

Son of God

King of Israel

Jacob's Ladder

Heaven's Gate

The names of Jesus are endless because he is endless. We will be naming him forever for he is the Mystery of God made flesh.

V

But that's not all the story. Jesus was naming them and is naming us. Perhaps God has given to all of us our own secret name, a name God has been trying to reveal to us all along, the name that captures who you are and what God is calling you to be and to do in the world. Maybe your secret name is Valiant or Beloved, or "Immortal Diamond."

In the final book of the Bible, *Revelation*, Christ tells us that on the final day you will each be given a white stone on which is written a new name, a name known only to God and you. Your secret name, the name God has been revealing to you all along, the name that reveals your deepest truest self.

Maybe, even today, God is whispering to you your name.