

Name-Calling
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Naming or name-calling can be affectionate: I sometimes think that the more nicknames a family has, the more openly affectionate they are. Or, naming can be vicious and hurtful. We've all seen that happen, as bullies label a victim with demeaning or small-minded epithets. Naming can be a political strategy. Calling someone a snowflake or a deplorable, for instance. Name-giving at birth can feel both momentous and tender, connecting us to the past and embracing us in a family. Name-giving later in life can indicate a big change, as with a marriage beginning or ending, or a generational shift, or a new role in work or retirement.

The Book of Genesis gives us a number of stories about God's conversations with Abraham. The writer sees their relationship as an ongoing dialogue: a way of showing the gradual spiritual and ethical insights given to this ancient patriarch. God calls Abram, blesses him, and sends him here and there. Abram responds, sometimes instantly, sometimes hesitantly, sometimes in words, sometimes in actions. Our reading today has God repeating a promise he has made before: that Abram would have many descendants and that they would live in the land of Canaan. But now a name change accompanies the promise. First, **God** claims a new name: El Shaddai, God of the Mountains, or God Almighty. This almighty God reaches into human life with power, and infuses Abram and Sarai. They don't become different people, but they become more authentically who they are and who they will be. Abram, the "exalted ancestor" becomes Abraham, "ancestor of a multitude of nations." Sarai becomes a princess, blessed with the chance to bear a child. The new names signal a new reality, not yet here, but certain to happen.

The blessing of a name change does not meet with instant thanks. Abraham falls on his face laughing. Later his wife Sarah will do the same thing. It's so unlikely, this promise. And they already had a plan B, actually two plan B's, for the inheritance. First, Abraham had a nephew, Lot, who could have carried on the line. Then, there was Ishmael, Abraham's son by the servant Hagar. Why wouldn't that work? In the story, it's because God says, "no" to their plans, and "yes" to another plan. God even has a name for their child-to-be. And because God has an ironic sense of humor, the son is to be named Isaac, "laughter."

I almost sense some reluctance on the part of Sarah and Abraham in this story. Maybe they were feeling old and tired. Maybe they had settled into a pretty good daily and seasonal rhythm and didn't need the complication of a child. Or maybe they were just afraid to claim their full identity, their full mission, their full future. That's understandable. The human condition is full of messiness and risk. These name-changing, game-changing blessings of God come with a lot of complications. And we don't always know what they are until years later. Nevertheless, Abraham and Sarah, in spite of disbelief and laughter, in spite of plans A and B, learn to live on the learning curve of a promise, wherever it takes them.

Speaking of reluctance, our Gospel reading gives us name-calling and naming too. In this conversation at Caesarea of Phillip, within earshot of the greatest power of his time, Jesus wonders who he is. He takes stock of himself. Jesus asks his disciples about names: "Who do people say I

am?” They give a few answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, another prophet. Each of these responses would put a certain kind of label on him, give him a certain well-understood path and mission. Of course, people prefer the known to the unknown. Then Peter comes up with another title: Messiah, or Anointed One, or Christ – depending on which language you are speaking. Jesus doesn’t refuse this title, but he doesn’t want it publicized – maybe because it was so likely to be misunderstood.

(By the way, I read a joke once that this command of Jesus’, frequent in the Gospel of Mark – not to tell anyone about him – was the one command that the church has consistently kept through the ages ☺ .)

Instead, Jesus speaks of himself as the Son of Man. This name is also easy to misunderstand. Some Bibles translate it as “the Human One” or even “the Authentic Human.” A Messiah would be understood as a heroic figure who rescues people in some super-human fashion from the political powers around them. Turning away from this, Jesus starts to define himself as the Son of Man: one who is full of sacrificial love, who is willing to suffer, be rejected, even to die, in his work on behalf of the oppressed. He teaches this “quite openly”: no secrecy here.

This leads to a heated exchange. Peter rebukes him, criticizes him, tries to get Jesus to shut up. But Jesus rebukes him right back, calling Peter “Satan” or adversary or tester. There’s a new name for you! Peter must have been shocked. And Jesus says, get behind me: get out of my way, and once you’ve done that, you can follow right behind me on my path towards Jerusalem, if you want to be my disciple.

Of course, we can sympathize with Peter. He probably thought Jesus was going off the deep end when he started talking about suffering instead of success. He felt protective: why should the Messiah have to endure the risk and the mess that is integral to human experience? But Jesus, the Son of Man, the authentic human, has been discovering a grace-filled, Spirit-infused, abundant life. He has discovered his identity not in self-preoccupation, not in security, not even in a name, but in a willingness to live on the learning curve of a promise, wherever it takes him.

This conversation can be a sort of model for us, even as we wonder: is Jesus testing the disciples, checking to see whether they’ve “got it” yet? Or is he wondering out loud - next to this symbol of Roman dominance, of Herod Phillip’s complicity - is he wondering where he fits into all this. What will be the source of his power? He has already given up so much to be on this road in the first place. The core identity of family and birth-place is gone, since they have rejected him. In a world of name-calling and honorary titles, of false hopes and false admiration, what can he say of himself that is really true, and really powerful? Who will define him? Who defines us?

Sadly, in our day, we experience too many false names and definitions. The most common use of the word “follow” (which Jesus gave to his disciples) is to “follow” someone on facebook or twitter. We show admiration and affection and affiliation in this way, and allow the number of “likes” or “shares” to define us. How ironic is it that we are now discovering that many followers and admirers are not even human, but “bots” put out there to distract us from the truth. If we follow, or cultivate, the acclamation of the audience, we allow these kind of lies to define us.

The conversation of definition leads Jesus to a new definition of greatness and a new definition of Messiah. The greatness of the Anointed one is found in service, which will always

involve suffering when it confronts the false seat of power, when it confronts Caesarea Philippi. Not because it is competing for power, or involved in some kind of tug-of-war. It is contemptuous of brute force, and is free even to mock it. Jesus' self-giving, self-emptying strength scorns and calls in question the whole rationale of systems of oppression and injustice.

Anyone who does this clearly puts themselves in the way of retaliation, which Jesus calls the cross. In the face of all this, we might seek to save our own lives. We might seek to maintain our self-definition, not realizing that it has been imposed on us by the approval of the crowd, or by the "things of this world." Jesus tells us that we have to resist the more obvious paths to power, risk ridicule, and consciously follow Jesus. This will give us our names and define us. This will guide us to be truly human. This will give us life.

In the season of Lent, we remember the pattern of Jesus. We do not actively seek to suffer, but we are on a journey that calls us to become more fully alive, more authentically who we are. And unexpected interventions are part of that journey. Back in the year 202, in Alexandria, the early Christian scholar Origen was a teenager living in a time of persecution. His father was in prison for being a Christian, and sentenced to death. The young Origen was eager to join him, ready to die for God. But, the story goes, when his mother heard of that plan she hid his only set of clothes. Because he was too shy and embarrassed to go out in public naked, his life was saved. He went on to become an original thinker, a great theologian, living out an authentic Christian life of witness. A contemporary of his living in France, the church father Irenaeus, wrote, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive!" So I hear the Anointed Human One, Jesus, saying, "I know who I am. I know my name. I am fully alive."

This Lent, we can ask the question, "How is God calling me or you to be a fully alive human in the pattern of Jesus?" Are we willing to live on the learning curve of a promise? I am not expecting the kind of intimate, cozy conversations that God seemed to have with Abraham, in those Genesis stories. I don't get to have the kind of talks Peter had with Jesus either. My naming happens in the events and surprises of everyday life, and in the ways I choose to respond. I can deny and let go of or lose those parts of my life that hold me back from a fuller, deeper, more authentic self. Each of us can do this, and find ourselves named as God's beloved children. Amen.