

January 1, 2006
Rev. Mark Forrester
Holy Name Sunday(b)
What's in a Name?
Luke 2: 15-21

For better or for worse, the holidays are the main occasion by which we reconnect with our extended families. When I was a lot younger and more easily bored, I'd squirm in my chair as we'd sit in the living room listening to a grandparent, uncle or aunt go on and on about family history that didn't concern me. Or so I thought at the time. As I've aged I'm much less prone to boredom, and I'm a lot more attentive to the long term memories of elders who may not be able to tell you what day it is, but can recall, with vivid detail, the meager gifts they got seventy years ago on Christmas morning.

My aunt Helen is approaching ninety and is a treasure trove of memorabilia. Unprovoked, she is always ready with a story from my now distant childhood. One such story that she recently told was not really a story, but a scenario that she insisted repeated itself with regularity. The scenario involved me, my mother and my aunt Helen back when I was maybe two or three, just old enough to walk through an open door, down the drive and into the busy street. My mother was soft-spoken, so when I'd be seen heading for the road all she could muster was a ³Mark, you come back here...please.² Aunt Helen said that I was a hard-head and never once let my mother's gentle request hinder my stride. But Helen was equally hardheaded (she's a Forrester after all!), and just when I was about to reach the street she'd yell in a deep, thundering command, ³John Mark Forrester, you get back here right now!² According to my aunt, the loud declaration of my full given name worked like a charm. Hearing my full name must have connected me to my family and served to draw boundaries that demanded respect. She knew my name, and my name knew me...and the sound of it brought about an obedient response.

Shakespeare asked ³What's in a name?² The question implies that a name is merely a word. And words, like names, are interchangeable. We acquiesce with Shakespeare and tell ourselves that ³a rose by any other name is still a rose.² We truly believe that an object's essence--be it a person, place or thing-- is something more than the name we give it. But this nonchalance about names is hardly biblical.

The Creation story in the second chapter of Genesis shows that all living creatures, human and animal, were made from the same arable soil. These creatures were paraded before Adam who was then charged by God to be their steward and protector. We are told, ³So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.² (vs. 19, NRSV)

What's in a name? According to scripture, to name something is a privilege that involves stewardship and responsibility. Naming exerts a certain power over that which is named. And as we study the etymology of names, we also see that names are rooted in character, in physical and spiritual attributes at the core of who we are--and who we are called to become. According to scripture, names create identity, and identity gives rise to destiny.

A classic example of how one person's power over another is determined by the act of naming is found in the thirty-second chapter of Genesis. Jacob, we are told, had cheated his older brother Esau out of his birth right. Jacob had been on the run from his brother for quite some time, but Esau was hot on his trail and a confrontation was soon approaching. Jacob crossed a gorge and settled in a remote place out in the wilderness. At day break God appeared in the form of a man who began wrestling with Jacob. Here's how the story ends:

When the man saw that he could not throw Jacob, he struck him in the

hollow of the thigh, so that Jacob's hip was dislocated as they wrestled. The man said, "Let me go, for day is breaking,"¹ but Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He said to Jacob, "What is your name?"¹ and he answered, "Jacob." The man said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you strove with God and with men, and prevailed." Jacob said, "Tell me, I pray, your name." He replied, "Why do you ask my name?" (vss. 25-29, NEB)

Jacob's wrestling match was both physical and spiritual. His body was effected for life in that he walked with a limp from that time on; his identity was also altered when his name was changed to Israel. From this new name-given identity, the destiny of an entire nation soon emerged. We should also notice that Jacob wanted to know God's name, but God would not be named. This is characteristic of Hebrew theology. To 'name' God is to presume that we can control God, and this presumption is considered blasphemy. To this day when God's name is spelled in the Hebrew bible, the vowels are left out. To even pronounce God's name for whatever reason is to exercise a power over God that's prohibited.

But try telling this to many of today's media preachers! They brandish the name of Jesus in the same way cowboys in the old west liked to sling the Colt 45. They whip out the name of Jesus from their bible holsters and fire-away at devils, diseases and doubters with deadly accuracy. They shoot the name of Jesus at cancers of every kind. They condemn evil doers by shouting the name of Jesus as a three syllable 'Jay-eez-us!'² They lay their hands on people with urgent needs and expectant faces, repeating ad infinitum the name of Jesus like a holy shibboleth... 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus...'²

I point this out not to mock fundamentalist Christians, but to remind us that names have power and that claiming names and associating ourselves with certain names gives us power, too. Being an ex-fundamentalist myself, I can testify to the power of Jesus' name. And I can also testify to the abuse of power when Jesus' name is used more like a weapon in spiritual warfare than a blessing of peace that can, if we truly believe, put an end to war.

What's in a name? Don't certain names confer status and distinction? Take the name of Vanderbilt. We might say that a rose by any other name is still a rose, but parents who shell out \$30,000 a year for four years know that a diploma by any other name is still not a Vanderbilt diploma. I believe that any bright, hard working student can get a quality education from a lesser known school. I also believe that a lazy, unmotivated student at Vanderbilt may be able squeak by, but his or her parents' resources will have been wasted. The intrinsic value of a Vanderbilt education may or may not be superior to an education attained elsewhere, but the symbolic power of the name Vanderbilt on one's degree will, in fact, give any student a decided advantage when they apply for graduate school, law school or medical school.

What's in a name? Consider the power of a nick name. How many have ever had one? Some nick names, if given by a loved one, are sweet and endearing. Often these kinds of special names are shared privately and symbolize a significant connection to another person or group. On the other hand, there are nick names that get assigned to us that can only be endured and, if possible, ignored. Sometimes these names are meant to poke fun, to humiliate and to control the other person. I had a baseball coach who always called us boys by names that were cruel oppositional contrasts. The fat kid who couldn't run bases was called Speedy. The kid who had the worst batting average was called Slugger. I once had a boss one summer who felt obliged to give all of his hourly workers pet names. He started calling me Sparky because he thought I looked like Sparky the Fire Dog. Every time he called me by that name I became selectively deaf. I wasn't going to answer to some stupid dog's name and one day told him so. He eventually called me into his office and let me go. All I could say was, 'thanks for the job and good riddance.'²

What's in a name? Well, some names tell us who we are and whose we are. Other names shape our character and destiny. Still, other names degrade and dehumanize us and are invented to deny personal power and integrity. In prisons and concentration camps, numbers are assigned in place of names. What's in a name? A world of possibility and a world of woe. It just depends on the name in question.

The name in question today is very special. In all honesty, there's nothing in question about this name at all. This first Sunday after Christmas is called Holy Name Sunday. Luke's Gospel tells us that Mary and Joseph brought their newborn son to the Temple eight days after he was born. All Jewish males were presented for circumcision at this time, and as their flesh was severed and blood spilled their name was given. We are told that Mary and Joseph's son was called Jesus, derived from the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning ³God with us.² This name, we are reminded, was given to Mary by the angel before she conceived the child in her womb. The name of Jesus was a common name among Hebrew people at that time, yet our Lord's identity was shaped by how he was named. His name was given in a prophecy and established at his presentation. His name identified Jesus as ³God with us,² and this sacred identity also carried with it a destiny that was spoken by the prophet Simeon in the Temple that day:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon....It was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah....Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ³Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.²...²This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many people will be revealed.² (Luke 2:25-35, NRSV)

What's in a name? According to Luke, the name of Jesus pointed to a divine identity, a holy purpose and a prophetic vocation. The holy name of Jesus carried with it the hopes and fears of his nation, a nation not unlike our own that struggled to stand as a beacon of light even as it sank deeper into deeds of darkness. If a name creates an identity, and identity inspires a destiny, then our Lord's destiny was clear from the start. From Simeon's feeble lips we are told that Jesus was ³destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel,² which means that he was to become a spiritual presence in God's world that would invite great loyalty and great opposition. His was a name, his was an identity and his was a destiny before whom nobody, then or now, could remain neutral.

Even as Jesus' name was first given for the world to hear when he was circumcised, so are our names spoken and received within the Christian communion when we come to be baptized. Like Jesus, our names originate with the blessing of the sacraments. Like Jesus, our names have a holy significance as we follow him in baptism, in service, in death and in life beyond death.

As we begin this New Year, may we be forever reminded and encouraged that beyond the names given to us by parents, relatives, friends or foes, our true identity and ultimate destiny is shared in this circle of fellowship as we gather around the Table and give thanks to God who knows, remembers and savors each and every name. Amen.