

John 1:29-42

What's in a NAME? A word that reflects one's identity. In the Bible many names literally translate into what the person's purpose was. Adam = Dirt; Eve = Life; Israel = Wrestle. Names are intimate. Naming is also a form of connection and even ownership. When you were born your parents gave you a name, that connected you to your family... and your parents take ownership and responsibility for you. At creation in Genesis, Adam is told by God to name all living things thus giving us possession, responsibility and stewardship over God's creations.

God many times will take someone's name and change it to serve a deeper purpose in connection to God...Abram became Abraham, Jacob became Israel, Simon became Peter, Saul became Paul....

Now it may seem we have little control over our names, and yet some of us will change our names to create a certain image.

For example, Cary Grant was born Archie Leach. Kirk Douglas was born Issur Danilovich. Queen Latifah was born Dana Owens. Lady Gaga was born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta.

They changed their names because they wanted a name that more easily connected them to American culture, making them more marketable to the American entertainment industry. For some of us, we change our names to disconnect us from a previous marriage or because we wish to carving out a new persona. So what's in a name!

Our text this morning has John introducing Jesus to some of John's disciples, with the description: "The Lamb of God!" This revelation formula is used a lot in the Old Testament and points to a person's identity and mission.

The text also calls him Rabbi, the Son of God, and the Messiah. All these names or titles tell us something about what Jesus' purpose is to become.

But Lamb of God is very unusual. It's a term in the Old Testament that directly relates to the Passover. A lamb, perfect and unblemished was slaughtered, and its blood was used over the doorposts to identify God's own people as the Angel of Death passed over their homes. The Lamb itself was consumed that night by God's people – a feast which was established then and is still celebrated by Jews today as a way of remembering how God saved them from slavery and took them as God's own people.

It's easy for us Christians too to see how Jesus fits the image as the Lamb of God. He was the perfect sacrifice - without blemish. He is the one who by his blood – saved us from the world, from sin and from death. And we also continue to remember how God saved us from slavery - the slavery of sin and death and took us as HIS own people. We remember this each week at this Altar when we celebrate the Eucharist.

Now did John comprehend all this when he pronounced Jesus as the “Lamb of God?” This image is radical compared to Jesus' other titles. It runs contrary to biblical images of royal majesty and kingship, rather here Jesus' purpose is choosing weakness and servanthood as God's purpose and identity...and we saw this at Jesus' birth a few weeks back.

Jesus was born nowhere special and the first witnesses of this miraculous birth were the lowliest cast in Israel – the shepherds. He was not born in a royal palace where the Magi expected him to be. He came not into kingship or priesthood, but came as a small helpless baby laid in a simple stone feeding trough. And by the way all of us come into this world in exactly the same way.

A baby bursts forth from the darkness of the womb into the light of the world and as parents we proclaim behold this is His or Her name...you are welcomed... you are loved...you are us!

At Baptism we are symbolically placed into the dark waters and emerge in light as a new creation in Christ with a new identity...and the church proclaims behold this is such and such... we welcome you into our community and you are wholly loved ...and you are us!

Joseph and Mary were instructed by God to name their child Yehoshua which means Yahweh is salvation. But Jesus' purpose was not to save us through might and violence like Joshua or David of old, but rather through weakness and service by becoming The Lamb of God!

Now in this passage this morning something else is happening as well... not only are John's disciples being introduced to Jesus and His name and purpose but they are also being prompted to figure out their own identity and purpose.

So Jesus asks the first two disciples which follow him, "What are you looking for?" Jesus is really asking them to identify their purpose...and they ignore the question for now.

Then they stay with Jesus all day. At some point Andrew goes and gets his brother Simon. He introduces Jesus to his brother as the Messiah... acknowledging again Jesus' purpose.

Then as usual Jesus turns the tables by NOT acknowledging and proclaiming who He is, but instead He proclaims who His disciples are to be.

In the subsequent face-to-face encounter with Jesus, Jesus gives Simon a new identity and purpose: Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas... How strange is that! So what's in a name?

Names are powerful things... In the Jewish tradition, infants are named after a deceased relative, but they do not receive the same name, just a name with the same first letter...so they are tied to their family history by the thread of that single letter, even as they are given the freedom to forge their own identity by a different name.

In the South, names are tied to family as well. We hear of men and women alike whose first names are a family name... My southern wife's middle name is DeSha, a family name that can be traced back to the fourth century. Incidentally my wife's first name Rachelle (French) which has Hebrew origins means lamb!

Names are powerful in ways both good and bad, as promises and as yokes, as helpers in our ambitions and as stumbling blocks.

Identity is at the heart of these naming rituals, and they establish our connection with our traditions... our history... and our culture.

The minute we are born we begin to be named and labeled: When I was born: I was Carmine sharing my Father and grandfather's name, the first born Italian Male born in America and in the city of Philadelphia, which meant I would eat certain things, would worship in a certain way, would be a Philly sports fan etc... my name actually goes together nicely...Carmine in Italian means song and Viola is an instrument...also Carmine is a color Red and my last name Viola is also the color purple.

Our names can shape who we are... and who we chose to become...and society also tries to rename and label us as we grow into adulthood. Names are important. They establish our boundaries, our potential and our worth. Names matter.

So imagine Simon meeting Jesus for the first time and the Rabbi changing His name... Hello Jesus please to meet you I'm Simon...no you're not your actually Cephas...Excuse me? A WTF (Why the Face) moment for sure?

So Andrew and the rest of Simon's family had known this man since birth as Simon. He had been named Simon by his father. When people saw this man, a fisherman in his little community of Bethsaida, they would say there is Simon!

But now Jesus... in his first encounter renames him Cephas. Cephas, an Aramaic word meaning “rock.” A name that we translate as Peter, from the Greek “petra” meaning “rock.” So if you see St. Peter at the Pearly gates his name really isn’t Peter...its Simon...or Cephas. We’re gonna give this guy an identity crisis!

So Jesus unhooks Simon from the ties of His life, from his identity as a fisherman with a family and a boat on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee... and transforms him, with a single word... by changing his name.

And what an odd name... Why not “water” or “net” or big fish?” Why something so very different from his current life? Why “rock?” In John’s gospel, Jesus doesn’t explain. He just lets that name hang there, ripe with meaning and potential.

I wonder if Jesus went around introducing him as Simon or Cephas? And living into his name was to be a lifelong process for Simon.

The name identified potential... a predictor of his future purpose as the foundation of the Christian church that he himself would never fathom nor see in his lifetime. And in the years that Peter followed Jesus, we see that he had many more Simon moments than Peter moments!

When he told Jesus that he was the Son of God, now that was a Peter moment. But more often, the man was Simon. Simon was the one who spoke too loudly or too soon, who pledged undying loyalty and then hid or denied Jesus to protect himself. Simon, who struck off the ear of the high priest’s servant... Simon who tried to push away those in need whom he judged as annoying. The man had been renamed true, but the transformation...the change as we said before would be a slow process...one that would take his lifetime and beyond!

And Jesus knew this. Jesus didn’t just zap Simon into Peter-ness with his renaming... as with all Kingdom of God kinda things... Jesus plants the seed and watches and waits for it to grow and bear fruit.

Names - the weight they carry, the possibilities they promise. and you rarely get to name yourself. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to grow into your name.

And God intimately named each of you, with all the mystery of your future, but you may not even guess God's name for you. You may not even understand the implications and expectations of your name until you have lived and made mistakes and learned about life... and God... and the world... and yourself...it's a process!

God is patient. Jesus renamed Simon and let Simon find his way into his name. He names each of you as His beloved children...and then God lets you find your own way into your own beloved-ness. Listen for God to call you intimately by your name.

There is an ancient Zen Koan that asks "what was your face before you were born?" ...Isaiah proclaims The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb He named me! As such, the Lord has chosen you too as His own. How do you reflect God's name in your own?

Glimpses of God are always bursting forth into the world through each of you. This idea of God bursting into our world is played out over and over again. It happened in the birth of the cosmos... It is seen in the seasons here on earth... and it was seen on the day each of you were born!

You are a child of God... first named and possessed by God for a purpose. What is your purpose, what have you been named...what are you to become?

Christian recording artist Jason Grey in one of his hit songs says it this way: We are the kingdom come. God put a million, billion doors to allow is love to shine through ...and one of those doors is you!

So in John's account of Jesus and His first disciples, Andrew announces - We have found the Messiah there He is Simon...and Jesus' replies Simon who? Oh no that's Mr. Rock... I'm going to call you the Rock (the original Rock)!

You see... they haven't really found the Messiah...No...Jesus has found them! And through finding disciples He calls us all - THEN & NOW to live into our true names...into our true purpose...revealing God in the world by becoming a living Church!

Perhaps I can say it this way...Look at the moon, it's nothing more than a cold dark rock in the sky... but when that rock faces the sun...Wow! It reflects beauty and light into our world and pierces the darkness...be that rock!

Reflect the beauty and light of Christ in the world by turning our faces towards God.

For Behold ...the Lamb of God is alive and well...in you and me...reflected not only in our strength... but especially in our weakness...for it is at those times when we reflect God's name, rather than our own name and ego.

When we reflect God's light into the world... we proclaim that the kingdom of God has indeed arrived...

Through Jesus - you are no longer named sinner... but are named forgiven

You are no longer named unworthy...but are named wholly accepted and loved...

See, you are no longer named as children of this world... Instead you bear a name that your heavenly Father has given you as a child of God!

Behold You are the Kingdom Come...

So what's your name?

Your faithful servant,

carnen