

**Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 2A) – January 19, 2014**  
**Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

In just this first chapter of John from which our gospel reading is taken today, Jesus is given 15 other names or titles besides Jesus (of Nazareth). He is called Word, God, Light, Only Son, Christ, Lord, Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah, the Anointed, Son of Joseph, King of Israel, and Son of Man—in that order! That's a lot of names. What is all this emphasis on names?

With some help from Frederick Buechner let me explain.<sup>i</sup> First, let me start with my name—it's Bean, of course, spelled B-E-A-N. It's a silly name, for sure. Yet if someone misspells it or makes some big deal about it in some sillier way, I have the feeling that what's silly is me. If someone forgets my name, sometimes I feel that it's I who am forgotten. There's something about the name Bean that sometimes embarrasses me, in just the same way that there's something about me that sometimes embarrasses me—though, at this point, I can't imagine myself with any other name. If my name were different, I would be different. And if I chose to change my name it would be because I wanted to express that I was becoming in some way different than I was with my old name. When I tell somebody my name, I have given that person some power or hold over me that he or she didn't have before. So, for example, when I am called by name by that person, I stop, look and listen whether I want to or not. Again, as Buechner points out, the same is true of God. He writes, "In the book of Exodus, God tells Moses that his name is Yahweh, and God hasn't had a peaceful moment since."<sup>ii</sup>

There is a lot more to this business of names than merely an assigning of signs of identification. In fact, a name does not merely distinguish a person from other persons; rather, a name is more closely related to the nature of the one who bears the name. The Bible portrays names as part of the very being of persons or of God, and are seen as part of their very character and power. For example, in the Old Testament the name of God—in Hebrew, Yahweh or Elohim—is sort of a "double" of the deity, imbued with divine power. In Deuteronomy, the temple is described repeatedly as the place which God has chosen "to cause God's name to dwell there."<sup>iii</sup> Also, when the name of God was mentioned by the High Priests it was seen as a way of conveying power from God to the people, or a godly blessing of divine influence upon them. In other words, the name of God spoken signified the actual presence of God. And because that power and presence of God are seen by some as so awesome and beyond human capacity to behold, in some traditions, the name of God is not spoken or written in full.

In the New Testament we hear "hallowed be thy name", "hope in God's name", "call on God's name", "gathered together in my name." Also, in our first chapter of John there is a line that reads, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...[John 1:12]." To believe in Jesus' name means to believe that he who is so named is worthy of trust and that he bears his name appropriately, and can accomplish that which his name or titles imply. Christian prayer is prayer in the name of Jesus; that is, in the character, spirit and attitude of Jesus, and in the hope that

God will save or make things right. The name Jesus—or “Jeshua” in Hebrew—literally means “God will save.” Anything contrary to this character, spirit, attitude and hope is to take the name of the Lord in vain.

And so names, like other words, are power, essentially the power of creation. Such power involving naming began as far back as the beginning. As the story goes, we are told in Genesis that when God first had to deal with the chaos all around, God created and then brought all of the animals to the man ( in Hebrew, “Adam”) and had the man name all these creatures.<sup>iv</sup> The very act of giving names to everything God created helped to turn chaos into cosmos, a livable, albeit difficult, world. And God has never wearied of trying to continue this creative and restorative process, and reveal God’s presence and purpose to each generation. Name after name God tried in search of the right name. When Creation itself didn’t seem to say it all right—sun, moon, stars, all of it—God tried flesh and blood. God tried saying it through Noah, then Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, the prophets; but none of these was quite the transforming name that God wanted to utter. So, God tried once more. Jeshua/Jesus was the name, the appropriate and transformative utterance, the Word of God made flesh. In the name of—in the character, spirit, attitude and hope of the one through whom “God will save”—through the One named Jesus, the ultimate nature of our world was revealed by God as being not a battlefield, but rather a community and home, and with a law being not that of the jungle, but of the human family. In the name of Jesus, God manages to say who God is and what humanity is, and who we are all meant to be.

In Hebrew the word “dabar” means both “giving name to” and “action.” Thus, to begin to name something is to begin to do something. Our gospels show Jesus doing this directly, specifically and forcefully, naming the “demons” as it were, in people’s lives and in the wider society, and shining his light of love and justice in those dark places. We have the God-given power of naming which gives us both the power of discovery and creativity, but also the power of hostility and deception. Psychologists assert that when we can name our feelings and our problems we are that much closer to healing, recognizing that naming these needs to be accompanied by confronting these now-named ills directly. As well, sociologists and community leaders assert that when we can name a particular ill or injustice in society, and name the specific causes or perpetrators of that injustice, we can get a better handle on how to address specific issues effectively. So, just as Adam in the Creation story is given the chance to participate in God’s Creation by naming all the animals, today we are given the opportunity to identify and name all our “shadowy” places and injustices, and to bring them to God in the name of Jesus, to be redeemed, repaired and restored.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who we remember especially on this weekend and tomorrow’s national holiday, along with many others, stood firm in the face of much unjust and cruel behavior that often accompanied demeaning and hateful name-calling. He and many others in the Civil Rights movement absorbed or deflected these names, while at the same time naming the larger evils of racism, sexism, materialism, militarism and classism affecting our society; and called people, in the transforming name of God to change our American society—an unfinished task to which we are all still called in

one way or another. And Dr. King knew that naming injustice had to also be accompanied by direct, specific and forceful, albeit nonviolent, confrontation.

Another powerful example of the transformative power of names was very evident in the life of Helen Keller. As many of you recall, Helen Keller suffered an early childhood disease which left her permanently deaf and blind. For the next several years, Helen grew up in Tuscumbia, Alabama trying to deal with her world around her which she could neither see nor hear. Her life during those years was extremely difficult for her and her family. She coped with her environment in very destructive ways, often prone to severe tantrums and violent outbursts. Unable to communicate except in very limited ways, she was alienated from much of her immediate environment. But then one summer morning in 1887 when Helen was eight years old something quite remarkable happened. Her teacher, Miss Sullivan, took Helen for a walk. Helen tells about this in her autobiography,

“We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word “water”, first slowly then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language and life was revealed to me. I knew that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange new sight that had come to me.”<sup>v</sup>

Being able to give names to things and people opened up a whole new world for Helen Keller where before there was chaos. She summed it up,

“I learned a great many new names that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that “mother”, “father”, “sister”, “teacher” were among them—names that were to make the world blossom for me...It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my bed at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come.”<sup>vi</sup>

In conclusion, the most significant purpose for the name of Jesus and his other names or titles—and our own names—is that God wants to be in relationship with us. As the prophet Isaiah testified in the name of God, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”<sup>vii</sup> Yet, having said all this, it is also true that God cannot be contained by any name, for God is also the nameless one, behind, around and within us, and yet also beyond us and all names; just as there are also places of

mystery in each of us that cannot be named.<sup>viii</sup> So, consider this New Year's resolution: let us be a church family which fully opens our hearts and minds to the one called Jesus—"God will save"—by opening ourselves to one another, to the new people in our midst, and to all those beyond our church community, so they will know we are acting in Jesus' name and that they will know we are Christians by our love.

<sup>i</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 12.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 12:11; 13:12; 14:23; 16:2, 11; 26:2

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 2:19-20

<sup>v</sup> Helen Keller, The Story of My Life, Chapter IV; See also Walker Percy, The Message in the Bottle (New York: Picador, 1975)

<sup>vi</sup> Keller, Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Isaiah 43:1

<sup>viii</sup> For example, we see this in a poem by Nori Odoi written on November 11, 1993, called "The Nameless Gifts":

#### **The Nameless Gifts**

Some gifts have names  
that glint like marbles  
that roll and clatter from our lips:  
the ring  
the book  
the golden coin  
the watch that tells us when to go

some gifts we feel  
but cannot utter  
the names we name them name them not:  
an arm supporting crumpled shoulders  
the glow of sunlight on a field  
friendship wrought in joy and sorrow  
that laughs and cries but needs no thanks

the nameless gifts  
are ones we carry  
to nourish and guide us through the night  
the named ones  
only mark their presence  
and speak  
of what we cannot say

And see also Eliezer Shore, from "The Soul of Community" in *Parabola* magazine, Spring, 1992:

"The greatness of community is that it provides a person with a context for his life. Before we can know G-d, we must come to know ourselves. Without a sense of identity, a person cannot be whole; *it is community that provides man with his name*. Social relationships, responsibilities, larger values, all help us know who we are. In an ideal community, each person's place would be so clearly defined as to make him indispensable. This engenders a sort of horizontal growth, as

---

our lives touch and are touched by many others, and it fosters in us a greater compassion and awareness of the human condition. In Judaism, we find the ultimate curse to be that of exile, the dispersion of community, the loss of one's place.

On the other hand, *solitude speaks to the part of us that has no name*, that wants to break free of the limitations imposed upon us by the thoughts and expectations of others. Solitude holds the promise of such complete and utter commitment to G-d -- such pure vertical growth -- that one completely transcends the mundane concerns of this world and moves into a realm of pure spirit. There, everything is good, everything is holy, and G-d alone is real. "Abraham was one," say the verse (Ezekiel 33:24). Like our father Abraham, a person who wants only G-d must learn to be one and alone"