



“What’s in a Name?”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

John 18: 1-8a; Isaiah 9: 2-7

November 28, 2021

“What’s in a name?” That’s the question that’s been spinning in my mind this week. Of course, Juliet’s soliloquy in Shakespeare’s classic play has a very distinct answer to that question. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet.” ‘What’s in a name? Nothing!’ Now, in Juliet’s, as we know, the name is the problem. The forbidden love that she knows stems not from Romeo’s deeds, nor his intentions, or even his character. The forbidden love comes from the fact that he’s a Montague. If not for that name, she’d have her heart’s desire – and, that name is not who Romeo is. The name, Juliet declares, does not define the substance, and it is the substance that matters! What’s in a name? In Juliet’s argument – Nothing! A rose, if we called it a turtleneck, would still be a sweet and beautiful as it ever was. A name does not define the substance, and it’s the substance that matters.

The challenge, of course, is that despite Juliet’s articulate and defensible argument to the contrary, there is often quite a bit to a name. Jay, our youngest, in his insatiable curiosity, will often pepper me with questions about why things are called what they are. ‘Why do they call a rock, a rock?’ ‘Where did they come up with blue as the name for the color?’ ‘Why do they call it a sandwich?’ These go on, and on, and on... Every once in a rare while I might have some insight for him. *As an aside, I can tell you that the word ‘sandwich’ was named after a man named John Montagu, who was the Earl of Sandwich in the eighteenth century, who apparently took to having his valet bring him meat between two slices of bread during his late-night card games – allowing him to continue to play as he ate his snack!* Most often, however, as Jay tosses these questions left and right, my response is, ‘I don’t know, it’s just what they call it!’ But, the truth is that, frequently, there is some sort of a story in some of these. The truth is that, despite Juliet’s otherwise desires, there often is quite a bit of something in a name.

Think back to the times you’ve been a part of assigning names in your life. Perhaps it was to your children – maybe to pets – maybe even some thought as to what grandchildren, nieces, nephews or others might call you. Some of those conversations might have revolved solely around what you liked – what sounded good to you. Many of them, however, likely began to fold in meaning and import far beyond the phonic aesthetics involved. Many of them began to carry in thoughts of what the name might reflect. For pets it might be something of their appearance or personality – or maybe some affinity you hold in life. For children it might surround family histories or other principles you’d like to reflect in their names. For your grand-

whatever title, it might have to do with what past generations used, how your lineage plays in, or how you want the name to reflect the type of relationship that you hope to hold with that child. It could be any of countless reflections that come into these choices, but the point is that there really is, often, very much something to a name – and that is even more true in the names that we see reflected in the stories of our faith.

Consider some of the names that we see in Scripture – just looking at a few of those we’ve encountered in recent weeks.

- Moses was just a nameless baby discovered floating in a basket on the river. Pharaoh’s daughter was the one who gave him his name, a name that means ‘drawn out,’ because she ‘drew him out’ of the water.
- God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, which means ‘father of many,’ to reflect the covenant they had made.
- Jacob became Israel, a word that means ‘wrestled with a divine angel,’ as a reflection of that night of grappling with God at Peniel.

Throughout the Bible, both Old Testament and New, there was actually quite a bit to a name. To Juliet’s point, it’s not necessarily that names defined the substance in the Bible. In many a case, however, the substance was very intentionally and articulately reflected in the name. So, while it may have been true that Romeo could have been called love and thus been stripped of the ‘Montague’ title that was the barrier between them, when it comes to the Bible, there is actually quite a bit to a name, as a name is often, very intentionally, a window into the substance of the person bearing that name. Which brings to the point of our message today, and the theme of the season that stands before us.

Leave it to me to leap-frog the entire liturgical calendar and start Advent, awaiting the birth, with the story of Jesus’ arrest on the night of the Last Supper. I know that, chronologically and thematically, it’s out of place – and I’ll warn you in advance that, when we come to Epiphany on January 9, we’re going to be with the magi discovering Jesus, and with those women at the empty tomb, at the same time. For now, however, there is this simple moment and question that arises in the garden that I think reflects a question that we would all be well-served to ask in these early days of Advent. Gathered in that garden with his disciples, with Judas and those soldiers approaching, Jesus stands, looks those guards in the eyes, and asks, “Whom are you looking for?” They answer... he notes that he is the one they are looking for...but it doesn’t quite seem to click, so he asks them again, “Whom are you are looking for?” They answer again...he declares who he is again...and things proceed from there.

It’s that one moment, though – that singular image of these men staring into the eyes of Jesus, as he asks them who it is they are looking for – it’s that moment that I think brings out the central question with which we are faced in the Advent season. Who are we looking for?

“And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” With that image and that question at the top of our minds, we’re back to the name thing now! For those of you who have already read my reflections in the December newsletter, there will be a bit of review here, so bear with me. But, when it comes to the question of what’s a name, that

question reaches a whole new level when we start talking about this child born on Christmas Day.

I've talked about this book before, and I mentioned it in my newsletter reflections, but this small book is a compilation of some 319 names for Jesus in the Bible. To be honest, I think the author takes a bit of artistic license by including a number of words that are really more descriptors than they are names, but that notwithstanding, there is something very powerful in exploring the reality that there are over 300 names and descriptors that this author claimed were used for Jesus in the Bible.

Servant of God...Rose of Sharon...Good Shepherd...Head of the Body...Morning Star...Potter... I could go on and on for what's left of our sermon time just reading off these titles, and this book has little devotional reflections that stem from each of these names and phrases. What is remarkable about all of that, however, is that it took over 300 names and descriptors to try to reflect the breadth of who and what this child was and would become.

So, over the course of the season before us, from now through Epiphany Sunday on January 9, we're going to marry that truth and the question Jesus asks those soldiers, as we dig into just a handful of these names. We will hit a few of the big ones...Emmanuel, Messiah, Jesus... On Music Sunday some of our Chancel Choir members are going to share their own reflections on a few... Light of the World, Hope, Word of God... And we are certainly going to encounter many in the prophets... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Root of Jesse, Ruler of Israel... And, most certainly, there will be hundreds that we won't encounter in this brief exploration.

The point of it all, however, is to bring us more fully to that moment in the garden, looking at this season before us, and opening ourselves to the question, 'Who am I looking for?' 'Who is it I'm clamoring for right now?' 'In the face of the circumstances I know, what is the face of Jesus that I need in my life?' 'Which of these 319 names of Jesus are the ones that I need to be calling out in the Advent season before us?'

What's in a name? For Romeo and Juliet, perhaps the answer is, 'Not much!' Perhaps, for them, the name is nothing but a meaningless barrier that stands between them and that for which they so long in their lives. For us, however, I would suggest that it is precisely the opposite. For us, in our ever-growing relationship with God in Jesus Christ, the name is the bridge that connects us to the heart of Christ for which we are clamoring – it's the window into the nature of the Son of God who was born into our lives – it is the very reflection of God incarnate that we can embrace in our deepest needs and longing today.

Who are you looking for? That's the question that I suggest is unanswered for every one of us in this room today. We are standing face to face with the season of joy and anticipation before us, and we are confronted with that question – 'Who am I looking for?' 'What's in a name?' I'd suggest that, in one of these names, and likely many of them, is the very answer to that question for each and every one of us! What's in a name? In one of them, probably in many of them, is the face of Christ that I'm looking for this year!