

“I Am”  
 Mark 8:27-38; John 1:29-42  
 Rev. David Hutchinson  
 Sunday, September 12, 2021

There's a lot in a name.

Or there can be.

“Israel”, for example, means “the one who wrestles with God”.

Israel's great patriarch Jacob in the Old Testament wrestled with the angel...

And forever after the identity of Israel and Jacob were one.

Jesus is called the “lamb of God” at the beginning of the gospel of John.

We know that early followers connected Jesus sacrifice with the lamb of Passover.

Just after Jesus is called “the lamb” in John - - Jesus renames Simon as Peter.

In Mark's gospel that same Simon Peter - - was asked point blank by Jesus:

Who do YOU say that I am?

Some people call you a prophet, Elijah, or John the Baptist...

Yes but who do YOU say that I am?

And Peter answers: the Christ!

This is a turning point in the gospel.

It is the first time Jesus identity is revealed in Mark's gospel.

Jesus - - is the Christ - - the messiah.

In John's gospel - - Jesus identity is up front right from the beginning.

There's no secret about Jesus in John.

Later in chapter 4 Jesus reveals himself is the great “I AM”.

This is the first time this happens - - and it is to the woman at the well.

She is talking about the messiah and Jesus says: “I AM he”

There are other “I am” statements made by Jesus in John’s gospel, but this is the first.

I am...

Does anyone know what your name - - means?

Has anyone ever changed their name...?

I remember when a friend of mine changed his name while we were in seminary. He grew up Jewish, converted to Christianity and worshipped as an Episcopalian, and THEN while in seminary became a Greek Orthodox priest! So part of the journey in the Greek Orthodox Church is to change your name when you are ordained. Kind of like the Pope does...

Along with our names, comes the meaning they hold.

Along with our names - - sometimes - - comes the history of our families.

I was named after my grandfather Henry, for example.

My middle name is “Henry”.

Along with our names - - sometimes - - comes the sense of what we are called to.

Sometimes...

In African-American culture it is often the case that people give traditional names to children to tap into deep cultural roots, *and* in addition, African-Americans may not be able to trace their genealogy as far as Whites because of the history of slavery in this country.

There’s a lot in a name.

Or there can be.

But my experience of growing up White in America in the 1970s in a small town in the Midwest was that I didn’t think much about this stuff.

When I learned about the deep meanings of Biblical names I was intrigued...

In the first chapter of John one of the first things Jesus does is a re-naming.

Imagine Jesus coming up to someone in this congregation...to you...

...looking you in the eyes...and saying:

“So you are \_\_\_\_\_, from now on you shall be called ‘the Rock’”

That’s what happens in the Gospel reading this morning. Jesus comes up to Peter and changes his name. Peter becomes - - so to speak - - the rock on which the church is built.

Jesus looked into his eyes...and called him by name...and RE-named him.

But Peter is not the only one whose name is called.

At the beginning of the gospel reading for this morning John, who was called the Baptist, points at Jesus and calls out, “The Lamb of God”. The disciples call Jesus “teacher”.

And as new disciples are called, the phrase, “come and see” is always accompanied by their NAME: Andrew...Philip...Nathaniel...

And ALL of this is surrounded by the Holy Spirit.

This IS John’s Baptism of Jesus story. We don’t read all the details like we do in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 3. But there are the words: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven as a dove, and remained on him” That’s right out of Jesus’ baptism!

Baptism - - is connected to our name.

And our name is connected to who we ARE: our IDENTITY.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah describes Israel as a light. Isaiah says to the people of Israel: “You are a servant of God. But it is too light a thing that you JUST be called servant. You will be a LIGHT to the world.”

Isaiah chapter 49 says: Israel is a LIGHT.

Imagine if our church were called: LIGHT of the world church!

The name “Plymouth” is actually connected to the roots of this congregation. Plymouth is a big name in the history of the Congregational church. And before this church was Presbyterian, it was Congregational. It’s a wonderful connection to the past, and the servants who founded this church.

But it makes me wonder if there is ALSO a name for the FUTURE of this congregation...

If this congregation were named for who we are...WHO would we be?

What is - - our IDENTITY?    What are we known for?

There are some people and organizations who have a strong identity. They really ARE known for something fairly specific. Nike is known for the swoosh. Martin Luther King Jr. is known for the phrase: “I Have a Dream”.

There is a series of take-offs on the old joke “Why did the chicken cross the road?” that plays on this reality... The old joke, AS IF told by someone who has a strong identity, or who is well known for something:

The original, of course is: why did the chicken cross the road?

Answer: the get to the other side.

But now try on these NEW revised answers to the old question.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

Bob Dylan: How many roads must one chicken cross?

Robert Frost: To take the road less travelled by.

James T. Kirk: To boldly go where no chicken has gone before.

Darth Vader: It could not resist the power of the Dark Side!

The revisions of the joke are only funny because those people are known for something.  
Their names MEAN something to us...

So what are WE known for?

Why would YOUR chicken cross the road?

If you can't answer that question...it's ok...there's still time.

As the disciples names are called in this morning's scripture reading, they are at the very BEGINNING of their walk as disciples. They had just come to see - - for the FIRST time. Their time with Jesus was a time to PREPARE for what was ahead.

So - - prepare for YOUR future - - by thinking about who you are - - and want to be.

We DON'T know how our lives will turn out.

But - - preparing for the future - - can change lives.

And - - - who we are going to BE - - - can start ANY time!

Will your baptism be just a quaint ritual?

Or will it have a deeper meaning?

Who will we be?

If you are struggling to answer these questions, it's ok. I really don't think we have to have all the answers to these questions right now. I actually think we work on this stuff our whole lives.

Life is the continual journey to figure out who we are...

... and what we are called to do about it.

But as you begin the TRANSITION of the next few months - - and then this interim period - - these questions are more important than ever...

There's a great quote from a 91 year old woman that confirms this for me:

“If I didn’t have something to look for...I would be lost.”

The quote is from Fredrick Buechner’s mother. He called it, “one of her most shimmering utterances”. She was 91 years old, and she could not walk much anymore. Her bed became her whole world. She kept up on her family and their adventures by phone. She watched the news.

But - - the most IMMEDIATE - - and in some ways the most important things to her - - were in that room. What happened there WAS her world.

If her cane fell behind the radiator she would ask: WHERE is it?

Where was her purse?

Where was her fan, or a box of Kleenex?

One day, while looking for something she said it:

“If I didn’t have something to look for - - - I’d be lost”.

Could the same be true for us too?

In some spiritual way, maybe we are on a journey of discovery.

No matter who you are - - no matter how SMALL you think your world is - - there is still something to discover - - and things to look for.

Who we are is - - a work in process.

Some of us are looking for God.

Others are looking for the meaning of life.

Others - - just looking for our car keys!

Some people are looking for love...others long for justice...

Maybe you are looking for forgiveness...

Or for your purpose in life...

What does God want YOU to do?

What is our calling?

Who are you?

Who is this congregation?

God's word is NOT always un-mistakable - - at first.

We do make mistakes...

We misunderstand....

And we try to listen...

And through it all - - we become more who we were created to be.

BUT - - if we want to MOVE along the way...

IF we don't want to get STUCK...

We DO have to do - - as the phrase from the Bible this morning:

“Come and see”

What is your calling?

Who are you?

What does God have for you, and your life?

Come and see...