

A Date With a Name

Isaiah 62: 1-5

John 2: 1-11

A young fellow who lived in the city was off from school for the summer and went out to spend some time at his Aunt and Uncle's farm out in the country. Uncle Joe had been getting more and more forgetful as the years went on. The nephew was surprised when Uncle Joe whistled to his dog and the dog herded the cattle into the corral and then latched the gate. "Wow," said the nephew, "that's some dog. What's the dog's name?" Uncle Joe's mouth popped open and he looked skyward. He shook his head and again opened his mouth and looked skyward. The nephew is watching and waiting. Finally, Uncle Joe asks, "What do you call that flower that's red, smells good, and has thorns on the stem?" The nephew answered, "Do you mean a rose?" "That's it!" said Uncle Joe with a big smile. He hollered across the yard to his wife, "Hey, Rose! What do we call this dog?"

The names that we give to things, like pets, children, cars, and other things, tend to mean something to us. Our old dog was named Woof because it took quite a bit of excitement for him to bark, but he was always ready to huff up a woof. I'm sure that Doogie could carry on at length about the naming conventions that he's used, but I won't let him.

Our son Ray is named after my grandfather who was big on public service. It was my grandfather's efforts that got private donations to build the first public library in my hometown in the late 1950s. A staunch conservative, he was thoroughly disgusted 20 years later when the City took over the library. He was convinced that government would only screw it up, which never was the case, but there was no convincing him. Ray's middle name is from Nancy's father who was in a class of his own, a natural born salesman, an unstoppable go-getter, and a total character.

Our daughter Rachel is named for the biblical character, but also for my other grandmother's sister, known as Raphie, who was an artist and about the sweetest, most permanently happy person you'd ever meet. She'd smile and laugh through the whole day, no matter what was happening. And Rachel's middle name derives from my fun-loving, brilliant, very creative aunt who truly enjoyed most adventures in misbehaving.

Those names we give may seem whimsical to some, and to others aspirational. They shouldn't be traps that pre-define who or what someone becomes, but they tend to reflect a sense of the hope and promise of the one(s) doing the naming.

Names are important in scripture. The name for God's people before they formed a presence in the Promised Land was Hebrew, a transliteration of *Hapiru*, the wanderers or sojourners. Once established, they took the name of Israel. According to scripture, it was the name given to Jacob after wrestling with God at the Jabbok River. Israel means, the one who contends with God. The name Jesus is a transliteration of the Greek which in Hebrew is Joshua which itself – *Yeshua* – means savior.

Our scriptures tell us more about names and identity, because as usual, God has a different way of doing things than we do. In Isaiah, we hear God aroused, determined to change the name that his people bear. *No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called My Delight, and your land [will be called] Married.* This is wonderful since no one wants to go around being known as Deserted or Desolate.

The problem is that these negative names accurately describe their reality. They were indeed Deserted and Desolate, and they knew it. Changing a name doesn't change a reality. Isaiah's audience hearing his message may say, 'Nice idea, but these names don't apply to us.'

God's people have to hear his future tense; *you **will** be called* [by this name].... God speaks ahead, imaging a vision of his coming promise.

These names are revealing. The Deserted are orphaned, abandoned, or widowed. For such people, recall God's compassion, repeatedly calling for care of widows, orphans, and strangers in the land. Our **in**clusive God has a very sharp eye for the **ex**cluded, making them a priority, and God wants them cared for. Unconnected to family, tribe, or nation, they don't **belong** anywhere, making them weak and vulnerable as prey for the powerful and ruthless predators of the world.

It suggests that even God had deserted his people. At the time of this section of Isaiah's prophecy, God had liberated them from Babylon and returned them to their promised homeland. Yet now it seems as if God has abandoned his people. So it is that God's expression here in Isaiah seeks to change that notion.

God changes this name of his people from Deserted to My Delight. Unlike the often complacent and haphazard way the world cares for its needy – if it does anything at all, now God will provide for, enrich, and bless each one as a child of God, finding **God's own delight** in them.

The other name, Desolate, describes barrenness, another indicator of weak failure, being undesirable, and a burden. This is the name for the land, Desolate, naming how the land fails to produce, impoverishing the people, and weakening the nation.

Yet Desolate can also refer to divorce. This occurs when the husband casts out the wife. Scorned by her husband, the woman may not be welcomed back to her family. She'd be seen as having brought shame to her family for failing to fulfill her promise to the husband. Brokenness, failure, sinfulness, and condemnation characterize Desolate.

But now God's new name for the land will be Married. This new name evokes images of bride and bridegroom, a celebration, a sharing of vows, a **covenant** of mutual fulfillment and joy. With the name, Married, the people of the Promised Land are wed as a bride to God, the bridegroom, and they gain a new and blessed relationship.

These names and their changes contrast how the world names vs. how God names. The world's vision is flat, limited by present reality. The world misses or ignores the sacred and spiritual that can transform a people or a place into something totally different. God's view envisions his future, filled with grace, blessing, and new life. The world can't see past its nose. We need to know that God does, offering us a hope and promise unimagined in the world.

The question we should all ask ourselves is, **What's my name?** If you had a nametag, you'd see one form of your identity before the world. Yet God has his name for you, too. God's name for you isn't written on a nametag. It's possible no one will ever utter it, and yet it's your name before God. It speaks of your promise, cherishes your gifts, and encompasses your blessing.

Now let's see what happens at the wedding reception at Cana, and how name and identity are keys to the episode. The reception has run out of wine. Uh-oh, either someone screwed up or these people are sucking down the *vino* like nobody's business! Jesus' mother tells him about this development. We'll see it's a loaded remark.

In a harsh-sounding tone, Jesus seems to snap at her, "Woman!" Our pew Bible NIV translation softens the expression as "Dear woman." In other contexts, this would be an appropriate way of understanding this. However, the context is a rebuke of his mother. This brusque reply to his mother tips off the reader that something odd is taking place here. We don't expect such an exchange between Jesus and his mother. More is at issue here for Jesus than a lack of party beverage, and that's why we should keep the sharpness of the expression in translating it – it's a cue.

Jesus challenges her, saying, *Why do you involve me? My time has not yet come.* First, we hear Jesus' rebuke in reply, suggesting he doesn't want to be involved in this. Second, we hear the thing that makes this really curious, saying "his time" hasn't yet come. Whatever understanding we have for the first remark has to make sense together with the second remark. It isn't simply involvement; it's also about a particular time.

The lack of wine and providing wine are loaded ideas. On the surface, the issue would be the lack of wine at a wedding feast. By the end, we realize that Jesus has presented the **finest** wine. This finest wine is not about the replacement of the wedding beverage. It invokes the symbol of the finest wines served at the Messianic banquet at a particular time, at the end of the age.

Does Jesus' mother understand what she's saying? Perhaps, but in John's gospel, Jesus' Messianic nature gets routinely ignored, misunderstood, and corrupted.

Jesus certainly understands this as a question of revealing himself as the Messiah, but for him, the time is not fulfilled and the end of the age is not ready. In fact, his ministry is just beginning. Should he disclose his identity as the One providing the finest of wine, the Host of the Messianic banquet? See what happens.

Water barrels that had been used for ritual washing by all the wedding guests are empty. Jesus tells the servants to fill up the jars with water. When that's done, Jesus tells them to take some of the water to the banquet steward.

Somehow (through Jesus? – it doesn't say!), the water in the barrels becomes the finest of wines. Now Jesus' identity **should** be known, but recall how often Jesus' true identity gets missed in John's gospel; it's a favorite theme of John's gospel. The wine is taken to the banquet steward who immediately recognizes its rare and excellent quality. He's surprised that the best wine has been saved so late in the party. (Any old wine will do since everyone's likely blasted, having drunk all of the wine they had.)

The steward expresses no gratitude, even though a moment before he had no wine and now suddenly he seems to have over 150 gallons of the very best stuff on earth. To whom does the steward turn? The steward goes *to the groom* and makes his remarks about saving the best wine. The steward clearly knows diddly about Jesus. Here, Jesus disclosed his identity and no one recognized him. [Bulletin cover by Bloch: *where's Jesus?*]

Unrecognized. Not fully known. Perhaps it's the same case for us, our identity before God is not readily known to others. That others may *not* perceive it isn't a problem. It wasn't for Jesus. He simply continued his ministry, and in John's gospel anyway, his true sacred identity was often confused and obscured.

Let's come back to our own name before God. If it isn't completely important that others know our name, it is important for us to know our name, to see how we are known and named by God for his sacred purpose. For me, Pastor and Reverend are simply titles describing relations in the world. For you, it may be Retiree or Grandma or Craftsman or Hunter or Couch Potato, but those are simply the world's definitions.

How does God name you? Can you imagine and name your identity before God? Are you Leader of Change? Are you Spirit Healer? Perhaps you're Prophet for Justice. Maybe you are Spiritual Teacher, or Generous Spirit. Or may be Interpreter of Vision or Fellowship Friend.

As we consider our name before God, we need to look into God's future and know that God is ahead of us, as always, shaping our present to draw us into his promise. We have a date ahead with our name, God's sacred name for you, his beloved servant.