

“What’s in a Name” by Peter Bankson



March 29, 2020

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Last Sunday, when we came together to worship online, I had a surprisingly wonderful sense of “being in this together.” There were about 50 of us, our variety captured in about 40 little thumbnails, each one unique, each one with a different name. Our names call forth our personalities. The image of Seekers Church gathered last week on Zoom is hovering in my short-term memory as I think about finding a Word for this week.

We’re heading toward the end of our Lenten season, looking ahead, in just a few weeks, to Easter and the resurrection. Resurrection has been a sign of hope for a long, long time. But given the dire situation all around us, the dread and the unknown nurtured by the coronavirus pandemic, it seems clear to me that our vision of hope could use a reset.

Our worship theme for this season, "How can these things be?" invites me to consider this week's lesson from the Hebrew Scripture. In Ezekiel 37:3 God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And Ezekiel answered, "O Lord God, you know." How can these things be?

Today we find ourselves in a global health crisis, in a situation where what we thought we knew isn't ringing true. We need to see things from a different perspective. We need to call things as they are now and look for seeds of hope in unexpected places. Would a new name for our experience do any good? What's in a name?

Given our recent focus on names, more particularly names for the Creator, and the emphasis in both Ezekiel and our Gospel lesson from John on seeing things differently, I want to offer a few reflections on the power of names to do that, to help us understand and live into both our Scriptural lessons for this week AND the global corona virus pandemic.

I want to offer three observations, about identity, epiphany and evolution as we look for hope in these dark days.

1. IDENTITY: Names have power, the power to affirm and the power to condemn.
2. EPIPHANY: New names invite new understanding.
3. EVOLUTION: A new name can invite us into growth and change.

IDENTITY: Names have power, the power to affirm AND the power to condemn.

What we are called reflects on how we will be treated. For Ezekiel, the valley was full of dead people. Dry bones are the remains of people long dead. When the Creator, who had led Ezekiel into that valley to help him learn something, asks Ezekiel whether these bones can live, the response Ezekiel has to offer comes from his perspective: "O my God, only You know!" It will take some more experience and deeper listening

for Ezekiel to gain a fresh perspective so he can step into the role the Creator seems to have in mind for him, that is, delivering God's promise of a new life for the people of this dry valley: "O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD." (Ezekiel 37:14)

Here in our time and place, how you name me reflects how you see me. That seems pretty self-evident. But how you name me also shapes how you relate to me. That may be a bit easier to overlook but seems pretty obvious to me whenever I read the paper these days or check out the latest "breaking news" online. Names are often links to a whole collection of feelings and attitudes. Maybe that's how Google knows how to select those advertisement that show up whenever I go on the internet. I get curious about something, type in its name, and suddenly I have inside access to all kinds of related information and opportunities! And there's another dimension. How I name you affects how I see you, feel about you, relate to you.

In the Word she offered last Sunday, Else referred to her early understanding of God. She said that early-on she saw her God as she saw her father – "loving, kind, involved, but also rather strict and conservative." Lots of us grew up with some version of that image of "God the Father." What's in a name? One thing is the often-unconscious reality that we draw conclusions about the object of our attention based on our experience with others to whom we've given the same name. We base our expectations about how the "Old man in the sky" will respond to us based on how other old men in high places have responded to us in the past. But aren't expectations like that really pre-judgements ... prejudice by another name? getting past this kind of pre-judgement involves listening for our own unconscious assumptions. That's a big part of the hard work of racial reconciliation and restorative justice. It seems to me

that discovering a new name for someone might just open a door to healing.

Names have the power to affirm AND condemn. In addition to being affected by how we are named, we also often look at this relationship between name and power from the other perspective: how we relate to someone (or something) determines how we name them. This is an element of praise in worship, and its also an element in the millions of images of God that has been inside our bulletin cover for Lent.

Closer to home, how we name one another affects how we see and relate to one another. We learn what these names mean from our families, from our culture, from the stories of our history. This kind of “labeling” undergirds much of the pain that we experience in our cultural lives. Much of this kind of labeling remains unconscious to us as long as we cling to the self-image we bring to the current situation. In many ways clinging to these stereotypes – and isn’t that another term for “old names?” – clinging to these stereotypes feels comforting. You know, if I can blame you, I can let myself off the hook. (I think of that every time I hear the coronavirus referred to as “Chinese.”)

As I ponder the power of names, I’m increasingly aware of how names can be tools ... or weapons. We use names to affirm and condemn; to welcome and reject; to include and shun. And the names we choose to use for the Wild, Wise Creator of Every Thought and Thing broadcast what we think and feel about “us” and “them.” Names have power.

EPIPHANY: New names invite new understanding.

As our understanding of the “named” grows, the possibility that choosing, or being given, a new name can open us to new understanding. Both the Hebrew scripture story of the valley full of bones, and the Gospel story of Lazarus being called “dead” or “asleep” seem to illuminate the question.

In the Gospel story Jesus gets a report that Lazarus is ill, and he should go quickly to be with the family. He waits, knowing there is more to the story than bringing a quick cure to his close friend. Over time, the story grows, and we learn that this is an opportunity for Jesus' disciples, and some of his closest friends, to discover qualities of Jesus that affirm what had been foreseen by some, that Jesus is the Messiah. In both of these stories, Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones and Jesus with Lazarus, the epiphany is followed by a longer period as the new name sinks in and becomes part of the emerging new reality.

For us, other, more common examples of these name-changing epiphanies include milestone events like baptisms, graduations, marriage commitments, ordinations, promotions ... In these cases, there are expectations that accompany the new name. There are often deep desires on the part of others that the "renamed" will instantly live up to the expectations that those "others" have attached to the new name. "Now that you're a (fill in the blank) we know you will live up to your new name."

Claiming a new name might feel like a personal triumph. (On my inner screen I'm watching a jubilant fountain of graduation caps rising above the class of 2019, and hoping the class of 2020 can find a safe way to celebrate.) But sometimes these epiphanies arrive through an uncomfortable awakening.

Not too long ago, as part of an important, ongoing conversation, I learned that the other party to the conversation knew me as a racist. That really didn't fit my image of myself. I felt misunderstood. I had a strong urge to leave the conversation, or at least marshal my arguments in defense of my efforts to be inclusive. But this time, in an effort to understand rather than defend, I asked for more explanation. That led to a rich conversation, one that opened a window on deeper understanding for me. As more of the story emerged, I was able to see how my lunchmate's experiences of

me fit a pattern that went with that name. After a bit more conversation looking for some common ground, I heard "... but I see you as a 'recovering racist,' and that's good news" It was good news to me, too. It helped me begin to claim that while there are, in me, strains of "racism," and other "...isms" too, that I can recognize, acknowledge as having been part of my life, and begin to set down. I'm beginning to accept – and claim – the fact that I still carry pockets of prejudice that are beneath my radar. But the "recovering" part of the name helps me engage, rather than deny.

Claiming a new name might also feel like taking a personal step to treat a chronic disease. I can imagine introducing myself at some kind of a 12-step meeting with "My name is Peter, and I'm a recovering racist." Discovering a new name with someone's help can open the door to change and new growth.

EVOLUTION: A new name can invite us into growth and change.

Names evolve, allowing time to make room for acceptance by the one being named, as well as those doing the naming. Sometimes this takes longer than we expect ... longer than we'd like.

Occasionally, we allow room for growth after the epiphany. I'm reminded of the importance of annual recommitment in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour. Here we make certain specific commitments as we claim the name of "Member" or "Steward." In this case, the fact that this new name is an invitation to growth and change is an explicit part of the process of responding to a call from the Creator. In our case, Gordon and Mary Cosby worked with the founding members to create a commitment that included the acknowledgement that we are all subject to new names and the growth they call forth.

I'm not sure how this relates to our dealing with the novel corona virus, but I think we're being called to see the world we live in differently, to open ourselves to some new

understanding of “How can these things be?” For me, personally, these times of comparative isolation are challenging me to take more seriously an insight that came to me last December in our class on “Rethinking Call.” One week the homework reflection invitation was to consider the call that is asking for my attention right now, and what my next step will be. My response that week was clear and direct. Here’s what I wrote:

*The call that is asking for my attention right now is to become a better listener, to grow toward becoming the kind of elder who can affirm others by letting them know that they are being heard, and to help open into their awareness options for good growth that our Creator is raising up before them. This isn’t “fixing things,” or even pointing out solutions that might seem feasible to me, but rather helping them find the grounding and the commitment to clarify **their** path, God’s call on **them**, and **their** commitment to take the next step.*

The response from the teacher was equally clear and direct:

This seems like a natural progression from “fixer” to “elder,” knowing that your skills will always be part of the picture.

This is about as close to the bone as I can get. A shift from “Fixer” to “Elder” may take the rest of my life, but frankly, there’s a ray of hope: if I can learn to listen better, and stay on the path that leads toward knowing myself as an Elder, I can expect to grow and change.

Two weeks ago, just before the Covid-19 pandemic seized our attention, I read a powerful quote in the obituary of Alan Alda, the legendary American actor, director, screenwriter, comedian, and author. The article noted:

He’s always been ready to speak, but now he’s eager to listen. Really listen. Alan Alda takes listening very seriously.

“I have this radical idea that I’m not really listening unless

I'm willing to be changed by you," he says.

The Washington Post, "Alan Alda has some advice," March 15, 2020, p E10

A new name, from Fixer" to "Elder" is inviting me into growth and change ... but I'll need to listen like my life depends on it.

CLOSING

So, to wrap this up, what's in a name? Here are three observations:

1. **IDENTITY:** Names have power, the power to affirm and the power to condemn. Names can be tools ... or weapons. We use them to affirm and condemn; to welcome and reject; to include and shun.
2. **EPIPHANY:** New names invite new understanding. Claiming a new name might feel like a personal triumph or stepping into a new beginning. If we listen with an open heart, we can be changed.
3. **EVOLUTION:** Hearing a new name can spur us into growth and change... if we're willing to be changed.

As we think about how we name the Creator, it helps to remember that the names we've carried for a long time have their own baggage, and if we want to explore fresh understanding it helps to look outside the box for a new image, a new name.

Going back to the millions of images of God, with some encouragement from the Eyes to See Ears to Hear Peace Prayer Mission Group, I've updated the "image generator" so it can that can produce 126 million different possibilities. That might help us fill some of our quarantined time with fresh insights about the ineffable nature of the Creator. You might check out the random image generator in the lower right corner of the front page of our Seekers Church website. It creates a

fresh image every time it is refreshed.

Looking ahead, and as we contemplate “How can these things be?” may we listen for the Holy Spirit, and be willing to be changed by what we hear.

Thank God we’re in this together!

Amen.