

January 12, 2020 “A Name”

“Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, my prophet, Priest and King, my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring”

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose b y any other word would smell as sweet.” Here Juliet tells Romeo that a name is an artificial and meaningless convention, and that she loves the person who is CALLED “Montague”, not the Montague name and not the Montague family. Romeo, out of his passion for Juliet, rejects his family name and vows, as Juliet asks, to “deny” (his) father” and instead be “new baptised” as Juliet’s lover.

What’s in a name? Today we learn about Jesus’ baptism and of the name God gives him – “You are my Son, the beloved” and God continues by saying “With you I am well pleased”. The name one has, such as “Montague” in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, is just a name. It’s how you live that matters. It’s the person behind the name that’s significant; you need not be defined by one name.

Last Sunday was Epiphany, a significant day of celebration in the Christian Orthodox churches. Epiphany is like when the light goes on, a sudden manifestation or a sudden appearing, things become clear. It’s a good thing. Epiphany is about coming to consciousness, both for Jesus and those around him. For Jesus’ parents the angelic visitation to Mary gave her and Joseph a strong

sense of the uniqueness of their child. The shepherds, the magi's visit, and Herod's threat confirmed this sense. We can see from Jesus' actions in the temple as a young boy that his developing self-consciousness follows the trajectory his parent discerned. When Jesus asks to be baptized by John, he is openly identifying with a new move of God. With the gift of the Spirit, God confirms Jesus' identity and expands his consciousness by commissioning him to messianic ministry. Epiphany is all about coming to consciousness.

The voice of the heaven blesses: "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." After John immerses Jesus in baptism, God draws near and rejoices in him. New ministry begins. As we begin the season after Epiphany, we rejoice that God's word continues to hold promise and power in our lives, calling each of us by name through living waters.

This Sunday, we focus on the Baptism of Jesus. At John's hand, "all the people" are baptized, including Jesus. John's expectation is being fulfilled as Jesus is named as God's own child. The work of God's reign is about to take a fresh direction. As Jesus is praying, God comes through the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. A "voice from heaven" names Jesus as God's child, the "Beloved," in whom God "is well pleased."

The gospel of Matthew tells readers that Jesus received authority for ministry directly from God in this baptism. The first readers of the gospel would

have understood Jesus' baptism in the same light at the anointing of Hebrew prophets, kings, and judges. In John's actions, Jesus is being set apart and recognized as a prophet.

Matthew intends that the voice from heaven give both authority and authenticity to Jesus' ministry. The authentic love of God that Jesus later proclaims is extended to him at baptism. When Jesus accepted John's baptism, he was making a big statement symbolically. He was identifying with a renewal movement within Israel. John dressed and ate like a desert prophet. Water, a heavenly voice, and a descending dove connected with biblical symbols that communicated not only Jesus' identity, but also the beginning of a new phase of God's activity in the world. When we accept baptism, we also connect with powerful symbols that are loaded with meaning.

As Jesus sets out to do the work of bringing God's reign, he teaches and acts with bold authority. In Jesus' culture, people behaved in accordance with their status given at birth. For the child of a carpenter, the right to speak in public or interpret the scriptures would need to be established. Through his baptism by John, God's blessing and call establish the authority of Jesus' actions to come.

So, we have a baptism, a ministry, and a name. Jesus is named God's own child. He is called "Beloved," but the list of names doesn't stop there. If you go on the Internet, as did I, and Google "names for Jesus", you can find a list of at least

100 names attributed to Jesus and their scriptural reference: King of the Jews, Advocate, Immanuel, Deliverer, Morning Star, Truth, Messiah, Lamb of God, holy servant, Good Shepherd and the list goes on. Why are there so many different names of Jesus? The names serve as a description of who Jesus is and how he works in the lives of individuals. There is no complete list. Each of us may have our own name for Jesus and that name represents our ever-shifting relationship with Jesus. As a child, your relationship with Jesus may have been like a parent; as a teen, a friend; as an adult, a companion or sojourner. Just as I have different names when I am with different family members and friends, so too can Jesus.

So today we learn of Jesus' baptism. Baptism can represent the sense of drowning our old self and a new person being resurrected out of the waters. Out of baptism comes new identity, new faith. Such is the case the day Jesus was baptized. The faith of the people, the faith of John, the faith of Jesus, all changed that day. In the living waters of baptism, God continues to speak. God draws near. God rejoices over us. God invites us to renewed relationship. God speaks a word of blessing and promise, offering identity and belonging. In the form of the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us in prayer, ritual and tradition, and actions for justice. In what ways does this living water give power to your life each day?

A name can teach us. A name can mould us. A name can intimidate us. A name can comfort us. To be called "Professor" means you would teach, instil

wisdom. To be called “mentor” would mean you’re a role model. To be called “The Terminator” would scare us. To find your teddy bear you call “Snuggles” would offer comfort. It’s all in the name. And in Jesus’ time, he had many names. He was a dynamic, versatile, unique individual who ministered a gospel of truth, justice and outreach. This ministry, this authority, was atypical for a man born as the child of a carpenter, but his status in the culture was achieved through baptism.

What’s in a name? Do the titles and names of Jesus hold any significance? In the days when the Bible was being written, the Israelites often chose names for their babies based on the child’s character or appearance. For example, Esau (hairy) and Korah (bald). Some babies were named because of an incident at their birth or their names were based on some hope or prayer of the parents, as in Zechariah’s name (God has remembered). Sometimes babies received the name of an everyday object, like Tamar (palm tree), and Tabitha (gazelle). Parents often named their children by the time of day they were born. For example, Shaharaim (dawn), Hodesh (new moon). The condition of the mother also frequently inspired a name: Leah (exhausted), and Mahli (sick). But as for Jesus, he was named prophetically. An angel appeared and said you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Mary will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel which means “God with us.”

Raising a child is an experience of coming to consciousness, for both the parent and child. Even before the child is born, the parents are thinking about names. Some of the names connect to special people in their lives, and others are just names that sounds nice to them. When the parents see the first ultrasound images of the baby squirming around in the womb, they begin connecting with who this person will be.

As the child grows, certain events, decisions, or actions stick out because they seem to vividly illustrate who this person really is – their character, ambition, and potential. It could be joining a sports team, playing music, or displaying a particular attraction to and tenderness with animals. So, both for the observing parents and for the child, certain events are markers along the road of coming to consciousness about who this person is and where she or he is headed.

We all have our own name. Sometimes it's picked with a story or meaning behind it. Sometimes we carry a name through generations of a family. Sometimes our name changes because of marriage or divorce. But we have a name. We also have a spiritual, theological name: children of God. That is a big name to live up to, but I believe we can. By remembering Jesus' baptism, ministry, life, death and resurrection, we can honour our name of "Children of God" and live our lives to the fullest that God expects us to. Our name gives us identity. Our name gives us

faith. As children of God we are remembered as Christians, with a will to live as Jesus did.

So, what's in a name? There's a lot. May you have the strength, as children of God, to live up to it. Whether Vancouver Canuck, prime minister, moderator, preacher, follower, visitor, doubter, seeker, your name is beloved and with you, God is well pleased. Amen.