

Naming is not a casual, every-day activity. Naming is one of the uniquely human tendencies. Sometimes names create peculiar happenstances: The Journal of the American Medical Association did a study on names in the medical profession in the United States. They found a Dr. Needle, Dr. Probe, Dr. Scope, Dr. Pin, Dr. Croak, and even Dr. Klutz. On the upside, they found a Dr. Fix, Dr. Cure, Dr. Heal, Dr. Brilliant, and Dr. Able. My childhood physician was named Dr. Hurt. If you had the choice, would you go to Dr. Brilliant or Dr. Klutz? Dr. Able or Dr. Hurt? A favorite literary device is for characters to behave like their names. From Cinderella to Darth Vader, names tip off the reader to personalities. Do congregations behave like their names? In Charleston, SC, we walked by a church called "Independent Presbyterian." Christ the Servant Church may live out its calling differently from Christ the King Church. By the late 20th century, thinking Christians had become sensitive to anti-Jewish bias in the church. The designation "BC," for example (Before Christ), morphed into "BCE," Before the Christian Era. Pastors began referring to the "Old" Testament as the "First" Testament, or the Hebrew scriptures, because old suggests out-of-date or inferior. Yes, naming is a uniquely human tendency. There is usually some seriousness to it. Parents take considerable care in naming a newborn. Our daughter, born Anne, gave herself a new name a few years back, Anacelie, to better reflect her absorption of Hispanic culture. For the ancients in Biblical times, naming was an integral part of the culture.

The power to name a person or a place or thing equaled authority over them. In Scripture, the power of naming starts with Adam, who exercises authority over the flora and fauna of Eden by naming them. God asserts authority over Abram and Sarai by changing their names to Abraham and Sarah. A name captures essence or reputation. When asked by Moses for a name, God replies cryptically, "I am who I am" (Ex. 3:14, part of next week's readings). The name of God is unlike any other name. God's personal name, "I AM," is transliterated YHWH, which we pronounce as Yahweh, or sometimes Jehovah. That is too sacred to be uttered aloud by observant Jews. Rather than pronounce Yahweh or any holy name, Jewish liturgists substitute the placeholder "Adonai." Both our scripture readings today are packed with names. "A new king over Egypt . . . did not know Joseph . . ." If we know the story of Joseph, we are surprised that this Pharaoh does not know the individual who dominates 14 chapters of Genesis. The name "Joseph" was given to him by his parents, Jacob and Rebecca, to remind him throughout life that he was "Jehovah's provision." You recall that his father's name, Jacob, means "heel-grabber," a lifelong reminder of his competition with his twin brother, Esau. An angel of the Lord gives Jacob a new name, Ish-ra-el, which means "the Lord prevails." So, all these proper names from Genesis come to mind for readers of Exodus 1 at the mention of "Joseph."

Today's passage begins a new storyline: the saga of God and Moses. And the passage ends with an important naming: Pharaoh's daughter adopts the foundling and names him "Moses" (Moshe in Hebrew), because "I drew him out of the water." We should remember the meaning of his name every time Moses encounters water. Our Gospel lesson is packed with names. The district to which Jesus travels, Caesarea Philippi, was one of two towns in the region named in honor of Tiberius Caesar. Philippi had an ancient history even then, dating back centuries to the times when Canaanites worshiped Baal. The Greeks built a shrine there to their god, Pan, and later, Romans built a temple on the same spot. So the setting for this dialogue between Jesus and the disciples is in the shadows of pagan temples. The text poses the question, "Who do people say that Jesus is?" We might say that the historical figure Jesus was an itinerant missionary, a provocateur, a public preacher, a parable creator, a healer, an exorcist, an interpreter of Torah, and an eschatological prophet. In the text, Jesus asks his disciples "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Son of Man more generally refers to the spiritual judge of all at the end of time). They answer with other proper names: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or another of the prophets. Apparently dismissing these characterizations, Jesus asks more pointedly, "Who do YOU say I am?" (Note the subtle "I AM WHO I AM" echo.) Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!"

"Messiah" is *mashiach* in Hebrew, evoking Moshe. *Mashiach* means The One Anointed, a ruler chosen by God. It is a political title as much as a religious one. Peter's radical confession is ground-breaking, especially in this quintessential Roman setting, dedicated as it is to the Roman Caesar. From the mouth of a common fisherman comes a confession of Jesus' great authority, authority nominally reserved for the Romans. What's In a Name? In this exclamation, Peter transforms Messiah from a generic title to Jesus' specific, personal name, Jesus Christ. Peter appends another descriptor to Messiah: "Son of the Living God," that is, the God of Moses. "Son of" implies not only biological relatedness to God but also an agent or messenger of God — an angel of high order. In an Empire like Rome's, Peter's affirmation is politically incorrect, if not seditious. Naming Jesus "Messiah" at this stage of the game is so provocative that Jesus cautions the disciples not to call him that in public. Jesus reciprocates Peter's compliment. The Son of the Living God blesses Peter with his given name, Simon Barjona (Simon, Son of Jonah). But from the moment we meet Simon, back in Chap. 4, we are told that his nickname is *Petros*, Greek (and also Aramaic) for Rock. Trading on that meaning, Jesus commissions Peter his chief deputy: "On you, Rocky, I will build my church." What Jesus sees in Peter that day at Caesarea Philippi is not obvious to anyone else. Pastor Janice Hearn imagines the scene from the perspective of the other witnesses:

“I can almost hear the other disciples  
hoot with derision. Peter a rock?  
“Peter, you’re more like sand.  
“Brawny, maybe, but a blockhead.  
“You’re impulsive. You’re arrogant.  
“You think you can walk on the water.”  
Despite his profession of faith,  
Peter will soon discover the cost  
of being the rock undergirding the church  
of Messiah Jesus.

Within the next 3 verses, Peter will protest  
the dangerous politics Jesus predicts will happen.  
Jesus will warn Peter, “My rock you may be,  
but right now you are a stumbling block to me.”  
So much for What’s In a Name.

Famed newscaster Edward R. Murrow,  
who was rarely at a loss for words, did a live report  
from a liberated German concentration camp  
shortly after V.E. Day.

In pleading tones,  
he urged his radio listeners to trust him:  
“I pray you believe what I have said about this camp.  
I have reported what I saw and heard,  
but only part of it.

For most of it *I have no words ...*”

The Second World War tested people’s faith.

The Protestant Church in Germany  
did not always pass the test.

Confronted with evidence of the Nazi’s deliberate,  
systematic annihilation of Jews, Gypsies,  
homosexuals, mentally disabled people,  
and anyone else not in the Aryan mold,  
the established church of Germany protested little.  
The Protestant church during the Third Reich  
failed the test of faithfulness to the gospel.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor there,  
witnessed the totalitarian oppression of the 1930s  
and was blunt in his opposition to it.

Except for an outspoken few,  
like Bonhoeffer and other drafters  
of the Barmen Declaration of 1934,  
the voices in the church were indistinguishable  
from the voices of state-sponsored evil.  
Bonhoeffer came to the United States in June, 1939,  
at the invitation of Union Theological Seminary  
in NYC.

He soon regretted his decision,  
despite pressure from his friends  
to remain in safety in the U.S.  
He wrote: “I made a mistake in coming to America.  
“I must live through this difficult period  
in our national history with the people of Germany.  
“I will have no right to participate  
in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany  
if I do not share the trials of this time  
with my people.”

Arrested upon his return to Germany,  
Bonhoeffer was hanged in a Nazi prison camp  
at Flossenber, Germany,  
two weeks before Allied forces liberated the camp  
and three weeks before Hitler’s suicide.  
One theological question mattered more  
than any other for Bonhoeffer throughout his life,  
right to his untimely end at age 39:

“Who is Christ for us today?”

Bonhoeffer was trying to understand  
how Christ could be "Lord" of a world" that  
didn't recognize his existence or seem to need him.  
In that kind of world, who is Christ for us?  
Years later, we must never allow ourselves to forget  
that most German Christians blindly obeyed  
their elected civil and church leaders.  
Sadly, the church throughout the developed world  
conformed to political passivity  
during the 1930s and early 40s,  
not daring to confront the awful truth  
about the Third Reich.

We were sheep,  
not political radicals like Jesus and Peter.

Naming is a uniquely human tendency.  
In news headlines, we are bombarded with names:  
Sunni, Shi'ite, Redskins, Charlottesville.  
Each name evokes  
a cluster of thoughts and emotions.  
The confession of Peter informs the church today.  
There is nothing comfortable about being a church  
of Christ, for Christ, with Christ, in worldly territory.  
An African-American woman priest who witnessed  
the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville August 12  
listened to the invectives for a while,  
then commented:  
“There are a lot of hurting people over there.”  
When her companion expressed surprise,  
the priest explained:  
“There is no joy over in that park.  
They are hurting.”  
The church of Jesus Christ, for all its shortcomings,  
is the test-bed for the Kingdom of God.  
What's in the name *Petros*, Rock?  
Some of us might imagine a cornerstone.  
Matthew's audience heard something richer.  
“Rock” meant something that was set in place  
to hold back the forces of destruction,  
such as a seawall.  
Rocks were memorials to times when earth  
and heaven were close, as in Jacob's dream.  
“From now on we are going to call you ‘Rocky,’  
and the church forevermore will be blessed  
by this moment, this moment of confession.”  
The Greek word *ekklesia* that we translate “church”  
occurs only here and one other place in Matthew.  
Nowhere else in the NT.  
*Ekklesia* literally means “the called ones.”  
In the Roman empire, *ekklesias* were  
well-mannered gatherings of the establishment.

By the time of Matthew's gospel, however,  
Christian *ekklesias* were rollicking affairs.  
(I wonder if Matthew would consider  
our *ekklesia* more Christian or more Roman.)  
In this earth-bound community of believers,  
God continues the naming-and-claiming activity  
Adam began in Eden.  
God is present, giving life to the community  
and receiving lives in return.  
May it be so, in this church  
and throughout the church.  
Amen.