

What's in a Name? I Am Who I Am

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Exodus 3:13-15; Genesis 32:22-30

What's in a name?

Names are important.

A name signifies belonging. If we have a first name, or a middle name, it means that somebody knew us, at least at one time – at least long enough to give us that name.

Sometimes the names that we are given, tell a story. We might be named after somebody beloved – named after a parent, or a grandparent, or maybe a hero, or someone deeply-admired. I had to laugh once – my mom's name is Bobbie, and my grandmother named her after her best friend. Evidently, though, my grandfather did not know that, and it just so happened that his first girlfriend's name was Bobbie. So for him, his daughter's name held a whole different meaning.

My son is named Samuel, after Samuel in the Bible – a story of a little boy who brought joy in in midst of a woman's struggle with infertility, and who was raised in the temple by a priest – someone other than the woman who gave him birth. My son Samuel and the prophet Samuel have a good bit in common.

Last names can also be important. They don't just signify that we were, at one point, known enough to receive a name, but last names signify that we have people. We are part of a family. There are people other than us in our corner. They signify belonging. A last name doesn't just signify who we are – it signifies whose we are. Who we are accountable to. Who we are in connection with. Where we come from.

And this can get messy, because sometimes, families are messy. The phrase "what's in a name" comes from the line in William Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, in which a young man from the Montague family and a young woman from the Capulet family fall madly, hopelessly, head-over-heels in love. The only problem was, the Montagues and the Capulets were sworn enemies. They were like the Jews and the Samaritans in the gospel stories. Or like the Israelites and the Philistines in the Old Testament. They wouldn't have anything to do with one another, and when they would find themselves in the same room, more often than not there would be bloodshed.

And so Juliet asks Romeo, "*What's in a name? that which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet*". In other words, our name – what we are called – is not what's important. A name is just a label. An identifier. It's not the name that makes a person. If you will pardon the cliché, "it's what's inside that counts."

Juliet has a point. I think that sometimes we do put too much emphasis on labels, give them too much power; make assumptions quickly about people based on them. However, there is still something powerful about a name. It's not just letters strung together. When we hear our name spoken, we jump to attention. When I hear someone say "Melissa," my heart skips a beat and my ears tune in – even when I know that there is another Melissa in the room. When I was a kid and I heard my middle name spoken, I always knew that I was in trouble. Nobody ever used my middle name except my mom, and very often a spanking was going to be involved. When someone calls us by a nickname, usually that is a term of endearment. When someone takes the time to get to know our name – to remember our name – that little bit of effort can speak volumes.

Throughout scripture, names very often held a great deal of meaning. More than once, when a person would have a life-altering encounter with God, that person's name would change, to reflect that person's life change. Abram, becoming Abraham. Sarai, becoming Sarah. Jacob, becoming Israel. Simon, becoming Peter. Saul, becoming Paul.

Although, to be honest, when I look through Biblical names and their meanings, in a lot of cases I think I would have wanted my name to be changed too. Especially if I were a child of a prophet. For whatever reason, biblical prophets were really fond of naming their children after particular prophetic oracles, and not pleasant ones. For example, Hosea named his daughter *Loruhamah*, which means "not pitied" – because he did not believe Israel deserved either God's pity or God's grace. And then, he didn't stop there. His son, he named *Loammi*, meaning "not my people." Ouch.

Isaiah named his son *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, which, besides being cruel and unusual to this little kid trying to learn how to write his name, the name itself means "the spoil speeds, the prey hastens." Basically, "somebody's gettin' destroyed!"

But even some of the more common biblical names have not-so-pleasant meanings:

Adam – "dirt-man"

Amos – "burden"

Jacob – "deceiver"

Mark – "at war"

Mary and Miriam – "bitterness," or "rebellion"

I'm sure some of these people wished they could shed their names, or else would have been really quick to pick out a nickname to go by.

But there are some people – actually, a lot of people in scripture – that don't get name changes; that don't even get really unfortunate names – they don't get names *at all*. Or...I'm sure they do have names, but we the reader just never know what their names are. Because for whatever reason, their name was not important to the story. In most of these cases, the unnamed people are people who society itself wouldn't have seen as very important. They were outsiders. Those who didn't get voice or vote or social

standing. Women, in most cases (but not all). Children. Foreigners – people from Samaria, or Ethiopia, or Syro-Phoenicia. Criminals, or those who had broken the law. People from different religious backgrounds – people who were not Jewish, or Christian, and who certainly did not worship in the same ways as God's "chosen" people. These were people who for a plethora of reasons stood "outside the fold."

Most of these people we only know a little, tiny bit about. Their ethnicity maybe, or their role, or their function, or their crime. But no more than that. We certainly don't get their entire life story. They don't get 14 whole chapters in the book of Genesis dedicated to them (like Joseph). They don't get books of the Bible named after them. We can't trace their lineage back through long, drawn-out Biblical genealogies. As far as the writers are concerned, they are nobodies. Extras. Nameless, faceless people whose lives and stories don't matter all that much.

Except, that they do. And we are going to take some time over the next couple of months exploring some of these people and their stories. Stories that may not have been important to the writers, but stories that were *very* important to the *God* who called them by name, even when nobody else would.

And I think that that's probably why it is so fitting that we begin this series of unnamed figures in scripture with the most well-known *no-name* of all: God.

Throughout the entire Bible, there is only one time that God ever gets a name: And that is when God takes on flesh and blood as the person of Jesus. That's it. Throughout the rest of scripture, and especially throughout the Old Testament, God had no name – because God did not want a name. People would ask God, from time to time, what his name was, and on every occasion, God declined to answer. The most famous instance of God refusing to disclose his name was in the story of Moses and the Burning Bush. I preached on this story relatively recently, so I am not going to spend a whole lot of time plumbing the depths of it today, but just as a quick refresher:

Moses had recently killed a man back in Egypt, and he was on the run. He was taken in by a Midianite priest named Jethro and his family, and Moses spent his days tending Jethro's sheep. One day Moses found his way to the base of Mount Horeb, and out of the blue, God spoke to Moses in a bush that was on fire but that was not burning up.

The voice of God called out to Moses, commanding him to go back to Egypt and free his people. And once Moses had run out of excuses, he asks the question of the day: "Who are you? Who should I tell them sent me?"

And God's response: "I am who I am." Or other translations read "I am who I will be" or even "I am who you will need me to be." Another way to say it: "I am enough." Or "I am what you need." Or "I am your everything." And "I am beyond your comprehension."

So from then on, throughout the Old Testament, whenever we see God's name mentioned, what we have is a made-up word, based on the letters in the Hebrew word for "I Am." In English, these letters are YHWH, which is where we get the name Yahweh from. But really, the translation is simply "I am."

And more than that, people would ABSOLUTELY NEVER pronounce this name. When reading the Hebrew scriptures, when they would come across this word they would substitute another word in – like Adonai, or Elohim. In our English Bibles, the word "LORD" is substituted – in all caps.

This story of Moses may have been the most famous story in which God refused to reveal God's name – but it wasn't the first. One of my favorite stories takes us back into the book of Genesis, chapter 32, the story of Jacob.

Jacob is another person who is on the run because of something he did. More than 20 years before, Jacob had swindled his own brother out of his birthright and his inheritance, and as far as he knows, his brother Esau has been holding a grudge for 2 decades and is out for blood. He receives word that his brother is coming to meet him, and so he sends his wives and kids and everything he owns ahead of him to meet his brother (presumably hoping that his family will provide a buffer between Esau and himself? Hoping that maybe Esau would kill his family first, before reaching him, maybe giving him time to escape? Jacob is really not a very good guy.)

But while Jacob is left alone, a stranger meets him in the night and wrestles with him all night long. For hours, and hours, and hours. One long fight. One long wrestling match, in which neither one of them will relent. Neither will give up. Neither will overpower the other. Even when the stranger manages to dislocate Jacob's hip, Jacob will not give up. He will not surrender. He has spent his entire life wheeling and dealing, deceiving and denying; wrestling and fighting and trying to get the upper hand in everything, trampling all over everybody else so that he himself might get ahead, and for Jacob, this was just one more opportunity. "I've already cheated my whole family out of every blessing that they might have to give; now maybe I can wrangle blessings out of strangers too."

So when Jacob refuses to give up, unless the stranger will give him a blessing, the stranger – later revealed to be God – gives him just that. A name change. A new identity. "Okay, Jacob. You are no longer Jacob. You are no longer that man who cheats and wrestles and deceives to get whatever he wants. You are now Israel. And you have a new identity and a new purpose. It's time for some massive lifestyle changes."

But interestingly – when Jacob asks the stranger what *his* name is, the stranger won't tell him. "Why do you ask my name?" the stranger – God – answers.

So why won't God tell us his name? For a God who is so personal, who wants so deeply to have an intimate connection with us. For a God who loves us so much that he would

suffer with us and for us so that we might be able to enjoy intimacy – forever – with this God – why no name?

I think maybe it goes back to what Juliet hinted at in her conversation with Romeo. The moment we attach a name to somebody, we start to get pictures in our heads.

“Oh, those Montagues. They can't be trusted.”

“Those Capulets. They are good-for-nothing scoundrels. Every last one of them.”

Those Republicans. Those Democrats.

Those Millennials. Those Boomers. (Sorry, Gen X, you're left out yet again.)

Those city mice. Those country mice.

Why do women always do this? Why can't men ever stop doing that?

“You don't get to name me,” says God. “Because I am everything, to everybody. I Am who I Am. I am who you need in the moment. When you need someone to sit silently with you while you grieve, I am here. If you need someone to hurl angry insults at while you work through your frustration, I am big enough to handle the worst that you can throw. If you need someone to give you a swift kick in the pants or to wrestle with you all night long until you see the light – you aren't going to like it, but you better believe that I will be that too. I will give you the words to speak when you need them – and not a moment sooner. I will push you, and I will challenge you. I will comfort you and I will soothe your soul. I will light a fire inside of you and help you come alive. I am bigger than your wildest dreams and nightmares, and I am more intricate than the tiniest of all snowflakes. I create you, form you, know you, name you. I call you my own and give you life.

I cannot be contained. Cannot be fully understood. Cannot be explained. I am who I am. I will be who I will be. And because I am, you are who you are.

So my friends, let us come before this nameless God, knowing that although we cannot name God, we cannot conceive of all of God's goodness, we cannot control God, we cannot deceive God, we *can* call out to God, and God will answer. And when God answers, God will call us by name: My child. My beloved. My son. My daughter. I see you and I know you. Now let me help you see me, too.