

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet asks:

What's in name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet...

I'm not quite sure I would agree with Juliet, but her question is a good one: What's in a name? Parents spend much time and thought in naming their children. Baby name books line shelves at Borders and other bookstores. We choose carefully when naming books or events, streets or communities. This morning, we ask, what's in a name?

There can be a lot of meaning behind a name, within a name. When we use the name of another person, we assume relationship. We possess something of the other when we address them by name. Think of Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter books. This character, this villain is known to most as "you know who" or "he who shall not be named." Most of the characters in this series greatly fear Lord Voldemort and so will not even utter his name.

Or, think of the name Yahweh. For some of our ancestors and even contemporaries in the faith, the name of God is so sacred that they won't say it aloud or even spell it out in its entirety. In some Jewish writings, you will see the letters G and D separated by a dash, or just the letters "gd" with no vowel or dash at all. A rabbi once told me that while spelling out the name "God" isn't prohibited in Jewish practice, it would be inappropriate and opposed to Jewish values to correct or shame a person for keeping this practice if it is done out of respect and reverence for God.

There is a lot in a name, how we use it, how we shorten it, how we represent it.

There are names that only certain people can call *you*, nicknames or names of endearment, names that gently tease or names that shorten a full name. There are names that are used to injure or exclude, frighten or demean. What's in a name?

In a song by the group Destiny's Child, a woman is talking to her significant other on the phone. "Say my name, say my name," she insists, "You're acting kind of shady, ain't calling me baby. Why the sudden change?" When he won't say her name, she knows something is a little suspicious. He is with someone else and won't say her name at the risk of exposing his indiscretion. There is power and risk all wrapped up together when we use someone's name.

What's in a name?

This morning we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, when Jesus was baptized. In Luke, John points to the one coming who will be greater than he is. People are being baptized and when Jesus is praying, something new, something hopeful, something amazing occurs.

At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven proclaims, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

"You are my *son*." Son, a name that only a parent can give, a name of familial relationship, a name bearing connection, intimacy, love. Son, a name of possession here when the heavenly voice says it, *my son*.

At the very beginning of Jesus' adult ministry in Luke is this naming, this moment when the Heavenly One announces possession, establishes formal connection, adoption of Jesus.

"You are my Son," the voice says.

This naming that happened at the baptism of our Lord continues to happen as new people, young and old, infant and adult, come to the waters of baptism and gather around font. At baptism, *we* are named as God's sons and daughters. At baptism, this naming, this moment of heavenly adoption is when God calls us God's own, by name.

Baptism is at the same time a very public and a very personal event. In community, we recognize God's presence in this sacrament as physical sign of water and God's word of promise come together. We follow Jesus' command to baptize. And at baptism, an individual is welcomed into the community of faith and into the heavenly family. The person is named, named with their individual name and named as a child of God.

What's in name? At baptism, a name holds the complete love and possession and adoption by God, the heavenly one. God calls us God's own. In baptism, we recognize *our* limitation and God's complete love for us and God's possession of us.

At baptism we are reminded that we are born children of a fallen humanity, frail, feeble, faulted. In baptism we are reborn, redeemed by Christ, and liberated from sin and death.

People of faith often have favorite scripture passages that they turn to in times of joy or in times of trial:

Psalm 23 - The Lord in my shepherd, I shall not want.

John 10.10 - Jesus says, "I came that you might have life and life abundantly."

Joshua 1.9 - Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed,
for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Isaiah 43.1 has always been one of my favorites.

In this Old Testament reading for this Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord, the prophet Isaiah speaks these words to a fallen people, frail, feeble and faulted:

But now says the Lord,

He who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name,

You are mine.

You are mine, the Lord says, I have called you by name. The Lord was speaking to a people in exile who had lost sight of their name. The prophecy here continues on to proclaim God's presence when the people pass through the waters and through the rivers, when they walk through fire and flame.

When we hear of passing through water, we often associate it with baptism and the beauty of being named and the heavenly adoption that occurs. But for the exiles to whom Isaiah spoke, images of passing through the waters and fires weren't always pretty. Think of the flood, God's judgment is exercised in the waters that destroy all but Noah and his family. Think of the cities upon which God rained fire and brimstone.

Isaiah is pointing out here that God is up to something new, something hopeful, something amazing with Israel. Even in the worst of waters and fiercest of fires, God is with God's people. God has redeemed them. God has said their name. God has called them by name. They belong to God.

Centuries later we can hear the good news here in Isaiah, here in Luke. In the waters and in the fires, God is with us. In baptism, God calls us. God knows and says our name. God redeems us.

We know that we are fallen and frail, but in Jesus God has restored us as God's beloved sons and daughters. We recognize that we are feeble and faulted, but in the waters of baptism God has said our names and called us God's own.

What's in a name?

In baptism, a name is new, amazing, filled with hope, beloved.

To the glory of God. Amen.