**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“The Name Game”*

Mark 8:27-38

February 25, 2018

The readings for today are both about names. In the Genesis reading, names are changed to reveal unyet realized truth about the people; Abram and Sarai are going to have a child. In the Gospel reading, the names aren’t changed, but the full meaning of the names Christ and disciple are made clearly known.

God knows your name. In the book of Revelation, chapter 2 includes a mysterious and evocative verse. It’s one of those verses that you can just sit with and ponder and imagine and dream about. As we have two readings for this Sunday that are about names and the meaning of names, this verse, Revelation 2.17, keeps coming to mind. In it God gives assurance to people who are suffering great trials. It is a word of hope for their life after death, “To the one who conquers I will give a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

It’s not entirely clear what the white stone symbolizes, but it echoes the white robes the martyrs and saints will wear just a few chapters later, symbolizing innocence, purity, holiness. The stone has “a new name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.” The image I have is that God knows our true selves, our secret names, which no one else fully knows, not even ourselves. But God knows. And on that day when we meet God face to face, your true name is made known. I think of Psalm 139: You have searched me, O Lord, and you know me.

God knows your true name. That takes us back to the Genesis story of God giving Abram and Sarai new names. It’s like they got their white stones early. And, truly, probably didn’t know what to do with them. Abram and Sarai, who were old and barren, were given names meaning “Father of Multitudes” and “a Princess Who Will Birth Kings.” For those two, at that point in life, at that point after years of being promised a child and not conceiving, either those new names are cruel jokes or they are pregnant promises.

Not everyone in scripture has a name with this kind of meaning, but some do. Adam is a play on the word for earth. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, which means May God Prevail. Joshua’s name means God Saves. Jesus in Hebrew is Joshua, God Saves. Simon’s name famously was changed to Peter, Petra, the rock.

When I think of names like this, names that have rich, evocative meaning, I think back to the movie *Dances With Wolves*. The Sioux Indians gave that name to the man formerly known as Lt. Dunbar of Ft. Sedgwick, stationed on the frontier by himself and forgotten. Lt. Dunbar befriended a small baby wolf, fed him, welcomed him, named him Two Socks. One day the two were playing around like a boy with a dog when the Sioux spotted him. And his name was given that day, “Dances With Wolves.” His name, Lt. John Dunbar, tells you where he is from and what job he has. Dances With Wolves is an insight into the man’s character. That’s what those names meant. There are some great names in that movie. The main female character is named “Stands With Fist” and she was a fighter. Kicking Bird, Wind In His Hair, Chief Ten Bears. My favorite is the one named “Smiles a Lot”. The name says a lot about the person’s character.

I had a name when I went to see that movie as a high school junior. I’d asked a girl on a date to the movie. She agreed. My name that night was He Who Splashed Drakar Noir and Planned to Make a Move to Hold Her Hand During the Movie. By the end of the night you could have also called me He Who Is Out of Luck. The girl I took was an animal lover. She loved her dogs. I knew that. I just seriously underestimated how much. I certainly underestimated how passionately she would react to the terrible scene when the callous soldiers take shots at and kill Two Socks the wolf. He Who Planned to Make a Move to Hold Her Hand was now sitting next to She Who Slobber Cries at the Sight of the Killing of an Innocent Animal in a Movie. He Who Planned to Make a Move to Hold Her Hand became He Who Literally Had to Get Up and Go to the Bathroom to Get Paper Towels so She Who Cries A Lot could try to wipe her face. But nothing would stop the torrent. And He Who Also Thought They Could Go Out and Get Ice Cream After the Movie became He Who Drove Her Right Home After the Movie because she was now named Inconsolable And How Could You Take Me to a Movie Where an Animal Was Killed Like That. And what could have been named First Date became known as Only Date.

Our true names are the secret truth about us, the truth God knows. “What’s my name?” Jesus asked his disciples. They reported what they’d heard around town. Some people say you’re name is John the Baptist Come Back From the Dead. Other people say your name is Elijah the Prophet Come Back on a Fiery Chariot. “What do you say?” he asked. They replied: “Well, your true name is The Christ.”

They were so right about how to pronounce his name, but they were also so wrong in what it meant. Jesus, we know your true name: Your name is Jesus the Christ, God’s Anointed One Who Will Defeat Our Enemies and Restore Israel to Glory. And our names are Disciples, They Who Follow You Into Battle and Rule With You in Power and Glory.

And Jesus sighed, “You’ve got a lot to learn. You know my name and yours but you are pronouncing them wrong.” Let me help.

And Jesus began teaching them that the Christ must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, everyone in power, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He told them this as plainly as possible, trying to help them understand what his name meant. He thought it was time that they understood that to be Christ is not to dominate enemies in a reign of power, but to be a suffering servant, not defeating enemies by force, but receiving their hatred with love and sacrifice and mercy. The way of Christ was not to vanquish but to forgive, not to add to the world’s violence, but to receive it. The Christ, and only the Christ, could take the sins of humankind on his own shoulders, and when he did he would take them to death. This is love, this is true Love, God’s Love made known. Divine Love made flesh.

He was telling them what they could not yet understand, even if he told them plainly: God so loves the world, the broken, fallen world that God is willing to send his son to embody all that is broken and fallen in the world, even to death on a cross.

They heard all of that. They weren’t too sure about all of that. Peter The Rock heard all this and began to explain to him just as plainly as he could that Christ doesn’t mean all those things. Jesus must be misunderstanding his own name. You’re wrong, I tell you. Christ doesn’t mean those things you’re saying. Christ doesn’t mean suffering like you’re talking about. Christ doesn’t mean the cross like a criminal. The name Christ certainly doesn’t mean death. It can’t. I won’t allow it.

My name is Stops You From Doing This.

No, Peter, your name is Satan. Get behind me.

They don’t know. They haven’t been paying attention. They’ve formed the meaning of the word, created a messiah in their own image, the kind of Christ, they thought to themselves, I would I be if I were named such a thing. I would rule. I would take control. I would make everything come out all right. I would vanquish the enemies, restore truth and justice and goodness. I would tell everyone what to do, and if they wouldn’t to that, I would compel them, and if I couldn’t do that I would defeat them.

But Jesus responds, that’s not what the name means. And, there’s something else. You’ve already figured it out. The name disciple, well you’ve gotten that wrong too. Some people will think that disciple or Christian means someone who has an easy road, who is saved in the next life and so nothing really matters in this one. They will think that disciple or Christian means someone whose prayers are always answered on demand, whose temptations are always easily defeated, who’s depression is always willed away, someone whose troubles are far behind, whose life is skipping from one blessing to another, higher and higher. They will be terribly confused when suffering comes their way, when they are persecuted for their faith. Some people will have this idea that Christianity is the easy path. It is not the easy path, but it is true, and good and worth everything in the end.

You need to hear me, Jesus said as he looked around. Your first names is Disciple. And you need to know this: If anyone would come after me, there’s going to be self-denial, and a cross. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his

life for my sake and the gospel will save it. We are on a journey together to the cross. It is only there that Death will learn its name is not Victor, but Defeat. The tomb’s true name will be Empty. And the new name of all creation will be Redeemed.

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