

Those of us who grew up in the 1980's were fortunate to have some truly wonderful stories that gave us a chance to revel in imaginative creativity and witness characteristics like courage, perseverance, and kindness that helped us navigate the tricky experience of growing up in the "real" world. A story that was popular with children during that time was the 1984 movie *The Never-Ending Story* which was based on the book published in English only a year earlier with the same title. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this fantastic story: it's about a boy suffering from loss and loneliness who borrows a mysterious book from a bookstore and the more he reads this book the more he finds himself swept up in a grand adventure. He follows a hero on a quest to find a cure for the empress of their land who is seriously ill, and her illness seems to be affecting the whole world, causing portions of it to violently disappear in a storm called "the Nothing." It's a grand adventure, full of fantastic places and characters, but the hero was unable to find a cure for the empress and the Nothing took most of the beautiful world away. The failed hero found the empress who instead of being disappointed in the hero told him he had achieved what he sought: a human child who could give her what she needed to be restored to wholeness and wellness: a new name. All she needed was the boy who borrowed the book and had been reading it to give her a new name. Which of course, he did.

Instead of being the ending of the story, giving the empress a new name was just the continuation of it. Things in that world were both the same and different, and adventure was found in how both learned to share their world, restored to beauty and wholeness just like the empress when she had received her new name.

Even if you haven't seen the movie or read *The Never-Ending Story*, I am sure you can understand the importance of names. Whether it's naming children, pets, buildings, churches, towns, streets or companies, a great deal of intention is usually invested in giving and receiving names. Naming was the very first job God delegated to humanity back in the beginning, in the first book of the Bible called Genesis. In the second creation story, right after God made the first person from the mud of the earth and breathed life into the person, God gave that first person the task of naming everything God created. Perhaps it was a way humanity could share in the joy of creation with God. And we've been naming things and each other ever since.

We've learned the importance of the significance of a name. Sometimes we give children names that are part of family histories, or names that have specific meaning. Businesses and companies choose names they hope reflect something deeper than just the product, but what the product represents or where it comes from. We might

name pets after our favorite characters in literature, scripture, or movies. Sometimes we give each other nick-names, an informal new name to signify our relationship or endearing characteristic of a person.

Names mean a lot to us, and giving names is a deep part of our being. Names also play an important role in today's Gospel where there is quite a lot of naming going on. The first to call out a name is John the Baptist who calls Jesus Lamb of God not once but twice and Son of God. These names are about who Jesus is: someone divine, chosen by God for a deep purpose. The name Lamb of God in John's Gospel points to Jesus' death. In the book Revelation, the last book in the Bible, the lamb is a Christological symbol, meaning it symbolizes Jesus. Lambs were sacrificed at the Passover and in John's Gospel Jesus died on the cross at the same time the lambs in the temple were being sacrificed for the Passover. Calling Jesus the Lamb of God is the author of the Gospel's way of expressing their theological understanding of why Jesus died, for the forgiveness of sins.

I want to insert here that this view is not represented the same way in the other Gospels, and that is okay. There are 4 different Gospels telling us about Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension and we don't have to spend a great deal of time trying to make them match up. As one preacher I highly respect said, "we can make room for those differences" and appreciate them for what they are. Those differences represent the rich diversity in the church from its earliest days and they can help us grow deeper in love with God in heart, mind, soul and strength.

John the Baptist wasn't the only one throwing names around in today's Gospel. Some of his disciples called Jesus "Rabbi", meaning teacher, not religious leader. This signifies how they see him, as a wise man or someone who can teach them something. Perhaps a reason the disciples asked Jesus where he was staying was so they could go there and learn from him for a while. Or maybe there was something deeper to this question. Remember, we're in John's Gospel today where words are rich with meaning. And the word our translation says is "stay" could just as easily been translated "abide" or "dwell". So, this might be an incarnational question, about the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. Which could be why Jesus didn't answer like a teacher with a lecture or a syllabus, but with an invitation to come along and see for themselves. Which might be why one disciple, the guy named Andrew, went to his brother and when he told his brother about Jesus, he used a different name: Messiah, The Anointed, the one they had been waiting for ages and ages.

So many names for Jesus this morning: Lamb of God, Son of God, Rabbi, Teacher, Messiah, Anointed. So many names with so many deep meanings, all pointing to what the season we are in in the Church Year is about: Epiphany, a word that means manifestation, specifically an appearance of the divine. All these names signify God is

somehow present in this person named Jesus. That is what the author of the Gospel and everyone in today's section of the Gospel saw and experienced in Jesus. God with Us. That's us humans using our God-given task of naming well.

But the naming isn't over yet. After all the names Jesus was given, Jesus had a name to give too. A new name. And he gave it to Simon, Andrew's brother. It's the name we use to refer to this follower of Jesus to this day: the name Peter. And even though this is the last sentence in today's section of John's Gospel, Jesus giving someone a new name is very important. It also points to who Jesus is, because there is an old Biblical tradition that happens whenever God is up to something new. When God is creating a new relationship with people God gives someone a new name.

The first time God gave someone a new name was back in Genesis, the story of Abraham and Sarah. But before they were Abraham and Sarah, they were Abram and Sari; God changed Abram's name to Abraham because that name means father of nations, and represents the promise God made Abram, that he would be the father of many. But this promise wasn't just to Abraham, God also gave Sarah a new name, one that means princess, signifying a ruler or mother of nations herself. It's significant to note that God's promise was to both a man and a woman, not just one of them. And when God changed their names, they were still waiting to have child and getting older by the minute. God's names aren't about how things are now, they are about how God sees how things can and will be. God's names are a promise and a hope. Which is why the next time God gave someone a new name it was Jacob, the guy who wrestled with God and walked away with a limp and a new name, the name of the people of God: Israel.

It had been a long time since God had given anyone a new name when Simon stood before the guy his brother called the Messiah and by way of introduction Jesus gave him a new name. A name that means "rock". While it's a pretty common name today, at the time the Gospel was written it was not. But it signified how Jesus saw Peter, who Peter will become by following him, a rock of faith who will bring so many others to Christ. Like in *The Never Ending Story*, giving Simon a new name signifies a new reality is starting, the story is about to take a new turn, not just for Peter, but for us all.

This is where we come into the story. Because Peter isn't the only one who gets a new name. We all do. Don't believe me? It's a promise made in the book of Revelation, in chapter 2. Read it for yourself. It's a beautiful promise that all "believers", all followers of Jesus will receive at judgment, a new name. Now the book Revelation is written in a very specific style with lots of symbolism and it can be hard to interpret. So, the name we will be given, at least as it is explained there, is a secret name.

But it really isn't a secret. Not if we've been paying attention. Because we've even already been given the new name. It was given to us the day we were baptized. When a priest baptizes a person, after the water has been poured over our heads, after the words "I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" have been said, the priest takes a bit of chrism oil and draws a small cross on the person's forehead and says the words, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever." That is when we received our new name. The cross. Which symbolizes Jesus. Our new name is the name of whose we are, who we follow, who died and rose for us, who will stand beside us during our judgment: Jesus.

That's how much you are loved, beloved of God. You are loved so much you have been given the name of Jesus. You are a child of God. Forever. No one can ever take that away from you, no matter what. Perhaps that is something to remember whenever you feel hurt, hopeless, discouraged, or when you notice someone else is suffering – you know, those things that can feel like endings. This isn't something to hide, it's a light to share with the world so the world knows there are beginnings on the other side of endings, that through Christ, God makes all things new.

How's that for an Epiphany?