

A Sermon by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
The Baptism of the Lord
10 January 2021
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; 1 John 5:1-9; Mark 1:4-11

“What’s in a Name?”

What’s in a name? Quite a lot, actually... which is why expectant parents often spend time considering them. We might just like the way a name sounds, or might want to honor someone we love or admire, or invoke traits we hope to see expressed in the person’s life: names like Grace, Earnest, Sage, Joy, Hope, etc.

A name may tell a story: Moses means, *to draw out*, because his adoptive mother drew him from a river. Samuel means, *God has heard*, to honor his mother’s plea for a child. Isaac means, *he who laughs*, after his father, Abraham, reportedly laughed at the absurd promise of conceiving a child so late in life. And in today’s Gospel, we meet the baptizer, whose name, John, means, *Yahweh is gracious*, given because his parents were also well past the age for expecting a child.

But as he grew into a very public ministry, John’s followers tried to give him a *different* name. They wanted to call him, *Messiah*...because that is who they needed him to be. Generations of hoping and waiting for a savior brings them to this moment, to the one they believe the ancient prophets of their people have been speaking of all along.

And John seems the perfect fulfillment of those prophecies. Raised in the desert territory of Judea, he was formed by the practices of the Essenes, a Jewish sect of self-denial, fasting, prayer, and ritual immersion in water. John cut a vivid figure in his traditional camel hair, and by his dynamic, unapologetic preaching. As stern and demanding as it was, that message drew hundreds of followers, persuaded that he is the promised Messiah and calling him just that.

How easy it would have been for John to accept this grand title. How tempting it would be to accept such a designation, to enjoy such elevation and influence over those who would so readily call themselves our disciples. Imagine how easily a lesser man might fall right into it. He wouldn’t even have had to strongarm his way through that crowd – he would only have been giving them what they wanted...

But John the Baptist is not a lesser man. He refuses the accolade and rejects the title because it is not true. He risks and tolerates disappointing them rather than lie to them. He says, “I am not the one. There is one coming after me.”

John the Baptist is crystal clear that he is part of a larger narrative of succession and that he is not the whole story himself.

As it happens, the “One” to whom John refers is a man in his late 20s, about to meet him at the water’s edge. His name is Yeshua, meaning, “Yahweh saves.” We, of course, know him as Jesus, whose attention was so deeply drawn by the public ministry of the Baptizer that he left his family and made his way to the Jordan River to be baptized.

And in the midst of this bold step and faithful act, Jesus perceives his *true* name, the name by which God’s vision – God’s dream – will be expressed in human form and life:

This is my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

In the mind and heart of God, Beloved is Jesus’ *true* name...

...and in the mind and heart of God, it is *our* true name as well.

If only we could believe it. If only we would live as *if* we believed it.

With every breath of his being, by every word of his mouth, prayer of his spirit, and action of his life, Jesus honored that holy name. He did right by it, with an unfailing heart for the poor, a keen ear to the cries of the oppressed, a righteous anger toward injustice of any kind, a demand that we look in a mirror before we dare judge others, a call to forgive as we have been forgiven and, ultimately, a willingness to give of himself, even unto his very life, rather than betray in *any* measure that God-given name.

And when *we* choose baptism, for ourselves or someone we love, we make a vow to that same path—that by all *we* say and do, we will honor *our* true and divine name, *Beloved*.

Of course, we will not do this perfectly. We are human and we will falter. There will be times when we are tempted to align ourselves with a viewpoint, or group, or path of action – *with a name* – that does not embody the God of Love. We have all known the temptation to laugh, like Abraham, or to weep, like Mary –when the promises of God seem too absurd or too distant to sustain us. We have all known times of stress, anxiety or anger, when we are tempted to lash out, or to be less than honest in order to avoid certain consequences, personally, professionally, or politically. We have all known a moment when we must choose between what is right and what is easy (Rowling, 2000).

There will always be the allure and temptation to betray the name we vowed to honor at our Christian baptism.

And when those times come, and I believe we are in such times right now, I bid you remember those baptismal promises, to remember that the name you have vowed to follow is Jesus. Way of Love. Prince of Peace. Only you can decide whether the slogan emblazoned across your chest, or the name on your hat, or the banner you wave, truly invites you to honor that one, precious, holy name. Only you can decide.

So, what’s in a name? Quite a lot, actually. Because in this life, no matter what you may be *called*, your true *name* is *Beloved of God*.

If only we could believe it. If only we would speak, pray, and act as if we *did* believe it.

Amen.