A New Name!

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John 1:1-14

When telling a story, one must first decide where to begin. In this regard, each of the evangelists made a different decision. Mark, who most scholars agree is the earliest of the four evangelists, declares in his very first words that he is starting at the beginning: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” He then goes on to tell us about John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus.

Apparently, Matthew did not think that this was starting early enough. It was necessary to show how Jesus connected with the entire history of Israel. Thus, he opens his gospel with “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Beginning with Abraham, he lists fifty-six generations connecting Abraham with Jesus.

But even that was not enough for Luke. He begins his story with the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus; but then he connects this back to the beginning with a genealogy that, unlike Matthew’s, goes all the way back to Adam.

Now John goes even further. It is not enough to begin the story of Jesus with the calling of John the Baptist. It is not enough to begin with Abraham. It is not even enough to begin with Adam. One must go back to the very beginning, even before creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” By the very wording of this opening statement, and by relating it to the creation of all

things in v. 2, John is clearly relating his story to the beginning of Genesis: “In the beginning God made...” He will connect the events in the life of Jesus to the very beginning of creation by declaring that Jesus is that Word who was in the beginning, and through whom all things were made, now made flesh, and having lived among us, so that we have been able to see his glory.

There is a common saying that we often teach children in the hope that they will not react too violently to name-calling by their peers: “Stick and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” This may have prevented many a playground fight; but it simply is not true. Words have the power to harm and to heal. Even in the case of the very children who are taught not to pay too much attention to name-calling, we do know that verbal abuse can be just as destructive as physical abuse. We know that a child who is repeatedly told that he is bad will very likely become a bad child, and one who is told that she is loved will have a better chance of growing up to be a loving person. Many of us, if asked about those experiences in which someone has hurt us most deeply, will refer to something someone said, rather than to something they did. And likewise, when asked who has helped us heal from our deepest wounds, many of us will remember something someone said, just as much as something they did. Words are more than sounds. They have power.

That is one of the reasons why we put so much thought into the names we give our children. Obviously, sometimes children are given a name simply as a way to honor someone in the family, or perhaps a religious, national, or cultural hero. But even in

those cases, when we give a child such a name, we are expressing the hope that this child will grow up to be like that family member or that hero. I was given my father's and my grandfather's name, hopefully as a way to honor them. This name (Justo) means "righteous," or "just." My classmates used to tease me, claiming that I contradicted Scripture, which says that "there is no one who is righteous (in Spanish, "justo"), not even one." In any case, as I look back on my early years, that name was sometimes a challenge to be what my name said, and sometimes a burden, knowing that I was far from what my name claimed; but it was always present and powerful.

The power of words is also seen in the original meaning of blessing and cursing. Both in Latin and in Greek—as well as in several modern languages—to bless is to speak well of, and to curse is to speak evil of. We still have a remnant of that in English when we refer to a blessing as a "benediction"—bene-dictio, a good saying—and to a curse as a malediction—a bad or evil saying. A blessing or benediction is powerful because it pronounces a good word over someone.

If this is true of mere human words, it is much more so in the case of the Word of God. John says that the Word of God is so far-reaching, that it encompasses everybody and everything. In order to make the point absolutely clear, he states it first in positive terms, and then negatively. All things were made through the Word. Without the Word, nothing was made. There is not one atom, one distant star, one bird or beast, that does not owe its very existence to the Word of God. In consequence, the entire history that follows, about the

incarnation of the Word and the life and teachings of Jesus, has to do, not just with believers, but with all of creation. That is what John is saying.

In a way, these first words of John are simply restating what the very first chapters of the Bible say. Back there in Genesis, God is depicted as making all things by speaking them. “Then God said, ‘let there be light’; and there was light.” After that first creative pronouncement, God keeps on speaking; and what God utters leaps into existence. “Let there be ... and there was.”

Thus, the Word of God is none other than the creative power of God. As John clearly states, the Word is not only “with God,” but actually is God. The Word is God speaking, God creating. This is why the Psalmist says that when the people were sick, and oppressed, and in darkness, God “sent out his word and healed them, delivered them from destruction.” This is why in Isaiah 55 God says: “...so shall my word that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” This does not mean simply that the Word of God will make itself heard, so that people will do what it says. It means also and above all that the Word itself acts in order to bring about God's will. Note that the text literally says that the Word of God “will accomplish” God's purpose, and “will succeed.”

Along these lines, it may help to remember that we attribute a similar power to human words. When human pronouncements are not backed up by reality, we say that they are “empty words.” Words—even human words—that are not “empty” have power. Speaking in such terms, it is important to assert and remember that the Word of God is never empty.

What John ultimately says is that this Word who was in the beginning with God, this Word through whom all things are made, this Word that is none other than God, is to one whom we have seen in Jesus Christ, for "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." In some ways, this fourteenth verse of John's first chapter is the very core of the Gospel. John claims that Jesus is the Word of God—the Word through whom all things were made, the Word that said, "Let there be. . .," and there was!

If this is true, our very first call did not come the first time we heard his name, or the first time we decided to follow him. Our first call is none other than our call into existence. Before I could respond; before I knew it; even before I existed, the Word of God said, "Let there be Justo." That is why I am, and without that, I would not be! And the same Word has also said, "Let there be Mary"; "Let there be Juan"; "Let there be Richard." No matter whether we believe in him or not; no matter whether we obey him or not; no matter whether we follow him or not, we are because the Word of God has called us into existence.

This is why the words of John are so disturbing: "the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." He did not come as an interloper into a world and into human lives alien to him. He does not call us to an alternative among many. He calls us as his own. His call has authority because, will it or not, we are his own.

There is more. If the Word of God is God's creative power, this means that the call of Jesus, the call from the Word, is not just an invitation to try to do something. Too often we think that the call of Jesus is like a challenge to do our best, to try harder, to achieve something. It certainly is good to do our best, to try harder, and to achieve something. Even so, this is not all that the call is about. The call is also an act or at least a promise of new creation. When Jesus calls someone away from his nets, or his tax collector's bench, or her occupation, that call has the same power as the one that said, "Let there be...." That call not only invites the person to a new life, but also creates that new life—or at least provides the power so that it may be so if we but heed the call.

It is important for us to remember this as we stress the call to discipleship during Lent, for otherwise the call of Jesus may appear like an impossible burden. Indeed, if we but listen we shall discover that we are called to undertake or at least to consider some very difficult things—things so difficult, that quite frankly they are well beyond our power. Jesus will even speak of taking up the cross, and of giving up one's life—things that none of us would normally want to do, much less be able to do. If we take all of this as a mere challenge—much as a football coach challenges a team to greater effort—we shall necessarily fail. On those terms, probably we shouldn't even consider the call of Jesus, for we are certain to fall short of the mark.

But the call of Jesus is more than an invitation. The call of Jesus is also his very act of calling us with the same power that called us from nothingness into existence. What the Word of God names, the Word of God does. In consequence, the call of

Jesus—whatever shape it might take—is not just an invitation, but also a promise and a redefinition. It not only asks us to become followers; it makes us followers. It not only offers new life; it promises and produces and gives new life.

In English, as in most Western languages, when we "call" someone, we may be doing one of two things: either summoning or naming. "Calling" is summoning, as when I say, "Winston, please come here."

And "calling" is also naming, as when his parents decide to call a child Winston. In both cases, Winston is called. However, my calling him is a summons, while his parents' calling him is a naming. There is an obvious connection between the two, for once a person is named that name is the most common way of summoning. When a child is born, after much debate, her parents decide to call her Stephanie. They may have debated for some time whether she would be Stephanie, Susan, or Louise. But once they have named her, whenever they wish to summon her, they call for "Stephanie." A name is a convenient way to call someone, or to identify that person. That is why in "CB" parlance, people refer to a name as a "handle." But the two meanings of calling are also connected because when Winston's parents named him Winston or Stephanie's named her Stephanie, they were also summoning them to live up to whatever Winston or Stephanie they were named after.

When Jesus calls us, he not only summons us; he also gives us, so to speak, a new name, a new identity, a new "handle," a new reality. Using a different imagery, the gospel of John refers to this as being born anew. Remember the case of Simon, whom Jesus

renamed “Peter.” But such renaming or rebirth is true of everyone whom Jesus calls—even if we do not literally change our name as a result.

At the beginning of the Gospel of John, in verse 12, we are told that, although Jesus came to his own and his own did not receive them, those who did receive him and believe in him have been given “power to become children of God.” Remember that in that setting it was customary to distinguish various people with the same first name by referring to their father’s name. Thus, the name of Simon, who will later be called Peter, is “Simon son of Jonah” or—according to another tradition—"Simon son of John.” And James, son of Zebedee, is distinguished from James, son of Alphaeus. This custom, quite prevalent among many different peoples and traditions, is the origin of many last names even to this day. This is true, not only in obvious cases such as Johnson and Davidson, but also of other names such as McDavid (son of David), Petersen (son of Peter), and even my own González (son of Gonzalo). On this basis, to become “children of God” is to take on a new name. Simon bar Jonah—the son of Jonah—is now Simon “Godschild.” And so are Mary and Martha, and Paul and Barnabas, and you and I! No matter what our physical ancestry, no matter what our nationality, culture, or race, we bear the same last name. All who have believed in the Word incarnate are one family, all with a common last name, “Godschild.”

This sounds like a very extraordinary and exceptional thing. In many ways it is. Many of the first readers of John, upon hearing that they were children of God, would have contrasted that status in the eyes of God with their status in the eyes of the

world—for many of them were poor, ignorant, despised by the world. Even today, believing in Jesus and heeding his call, and thus becoming a child of God, often marks a contrast and even a rift between those who believe and the rest of humankind. There are still societies where Christians are excluded from public life, fired from their jobs, even rejected by their families. Thus, both because it proclaims a status which the world does not acknowledge and because it often sets believers apart, there seems to be a radical discontinuity between the common life of the rest of humankind, and the life of those who believe.

On the other hand, that is only one side of the coin. This other side is at least as important, and probably more: those who believe are being called, not to some newly invented way of life or some newly concocted religion, but to their very being as it was originally intended. The one in whom they believe is the Word who was in the beginning, and through whom all things were made. They are now made "children of God," true; but that is precisely what they were from the beginning.

The call to follow Jesus and become a child of God is different in time from the call into existence; but its content is the same.

Lent is a season for transformation. That transformation may at times seem like a sacrifice and may even be painful. But, more than a painful sacrifice, the transformation of discipleship is a reclaiming of our true being, a movement towards authenticity.

Thus, although throughout this season of Lent we shall all be seeking to discern Jesus' call to us, in the end that call is an invitation to become what we were intended to

be at that primal call, when of each one of us the eternal Word of God said, “Let there be...”!

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ... And that Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. ... He came to his own, and yet his own received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...”