

October 1, 2017 – Narrative Lectionary Year 4-4

“Creation Consciousness: Naming and the Name of God” – Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: *Exodus 2:23-25; 3:10-15; 4:10-17*

Since we are speaking about naming today, I wanted to begin with a poem.

Naming the Animals

by [Anthony Hecht](#)

*Having commanded Adam to bestow
Names upon all the creatures, God withdrew
To empyrean palaces of blue
That warm and windless morning long ago,
And seemed to take no notice of the vexed
Look on the young man's face as he took thought
Of all the miracles the Lord had wrought
Now to be labeled, dubbed, yclept, indexed.*

*Before an addled mind and puddle brow,
The feathered nation and the finny prey
Passed by; there went biped and quadruped.
Adam looked forth with bottomless dismay
Into the tragic eyes of his first cow,
And shyly ventured, "Thou shalt be called 'Fred.'"¹*

We have made quite a leap through Scripture to where we are today, from the land of Abraham all the way to Egypt. Very quickly, following Jacob’s dream – Isaac dies and is buried by Esau and Jacob, Jacob inherits his father’s lands, Jacob has 12 sons, 11 of the sons are really awful people and sell their little brother Joseph into slavery, Joseph ends up in Egypt, a famine falls across the lands and Jacob, who thinks his beloved son Joseph is dead, sends his other sons to Egypt for food, the brothers discover it is Joseph who now is the administrator of Egypt with the Pharaoh, Joseph brings his family to Egypt to live through the famine,

and it is there that Jacob appoints the 12 tribes of Israel. In between the end of Genesis and what we hear today, a new Pharaoh has arisen, who has enslaved the Israelites. This is the world into which Moses is born and grows up. When he sees how his people are being treated, he kills an Egyptian guard. Moses goes on the run, like Jacob was on the run last week, and here we join Moses next to the burning bush.

¹ *Naming the Animals* by Anthony Hecht. From his *Collected Later Poems*, 2003. Found at <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2008/06/26>

Throughout my studies of Scripture and theology, one thing that has most fascinated me is the importance of the naming of things in the Bible. In the ancient world, once a person knew the name of a person, a creature, place, or a thing, that person could, if they so desired, take control of that person, creature, place, or thing by using the name. We call this ‘magical thinking’ today, but in doing that, we miss something key to our understanding of our faith and the world we live in. To dismiss the power of the naming of things is to, finally, devalue the words and language we use with one another.

This is how those who seek power over others use language to disempower people and exert control over others – by changing the meanings of words and renaming things to their benefit.

From a faith perspective, whether 5000 years ago, 2000 years ago, or today, the exercise of our spiritual life is discerning if our words and language are seeking to care for and nurture or if our words seeking to overpower and disempower.

We, as people of faith, live in a universe created by words. For a Christian, reality is spoken into being; language is the gossamer fabric of creation. In Genesis 1, as we discovered a few weeks ago, God speaks a good, relational, and creative universe into being, beginning with “Let there be light”. It goes without saying, then, that if we wish to live in such a way that is aligned with God and God’s creation, we also might want to mirror God by using words in good, relational, and creative ways.

The very first thing of Adam does after his creation is the naming of the animals (Gen 2:19-20). The act of naming is also an act of definition. This is not so true for us anymore. My name, “Seth”, for instance, which is the 5th name given in the Bible, by the way, means in Hebrew either “appointed”, or “substitute”. My name did not define the direction of my life, and nor did my life define my name. It is simply a designation. This is not true in many indigenous cultures. There, you have a given name at birth, but your true name arises based on something you do when you get older. Your name may change from a given name – “Seth” – to “Bear-Killer” or “Green Hand” or “He Who Struggles” or “He Who Saves” - some other designation that relates to what you have done.

In the Hebrew tradition, it is understood that the name of the creature given by Adam is the melding of the creature’s physical and spiritual essence. This is the way Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, puts it:

"By naming each creature, Adam had to analyze the essence and nature of each one and thereby deduce its name...by naming the animals in accordance with their spiritual source, Adam did more than display his brilliance –

*he articulated the notion that physical reality can and should express its spiritual origin and be true to its spiritual essence...Here Adam began the process of fulfilling the purpose of Creation, of making the world into a home for G-d."*²

Naming, and language itself, is the foundation of the world in which we live. We know the world and one another because of what we say about the world and one another. As I have said before, all we really know about another person is what they say about themselves, and what others know about us is what we say to them.

² From an article entitled *Naming with Divine Inspiration* by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, found at Chabad.org.

Even if we do things, the things we do only take on meaning when we or someone else says something about what has been done. In linguistics, the rule is a word is associated with and built upon other words that have deep roots and meaning, and all words finally dissolve into names. Words and names describe, command, perform, create, and name.

Words, names, language, have power, deep-reaching, deeply ancient, creative power. How we understand and use language matters greatly in Scripture.

Which is why it matters so much that Moses, in our reading today, asks for God's name. Now, to be clear, Moses is on question 2 in his 5 point denial of God's call upon him. This is Moses' "*Who are you*" question. Moses first question in all this was a "*Who am I?*" question. After these questions, Moses denies God's call by saying "*They won't believe me*". Then Moses denies the call by saying "*I don't talk real good*".

Then Moses 5th denial is, "*You know, you are God and everything, and you sure have done a lot of stuff. But this whole rescuing the Israelites from Pharaoh thing sounds like a really bad idea, and I don't want to do it.*"

Is anyone more human than Moses?

Moses asks for God's name and God gives not one, but three names. "*I AM who I AM*", "*I AM*", "*The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*".

Remember when I said earlier that the ancient world believed that when you knew the name of something, you could gain power over it? It was believed that if you knew the name of a God when Moses was around, you could, by a series of magical and spiritual acts, gain control over a god and get the god to do what you wanted that god to do for you.

Before you dismiss this as ridiculous thinking, I would remind you there are whole movements afoot today in the world that do precisely this.

By knowing the name of a god, rituals are performed, prayers are made, and actions are done to get things from that god. If you pray the right way, God will give you what you want. We still do this. The techniques change, but not the idea.

Even so, God gives a name to Moses. Granted, it is unpronounceable. We say "Yahweh", but this is not really what the letters YHWH sound like.

There is no sound for them. So the Jewish people use other names, like "Hashem" or "Adonai". But God has given a name, nonetheless. This is an incredible act of trust on God's part, and it is an incredible moment for Moses to bear witness to.

This tells us something very important. God created the universe and God understands relationships in a particular way, a very different way from the way other people and tribes understand creation and their relationships.

When God gives Adam the power to name the animals, it is so Adam can find a companion. Naming as humanity's very first act is a gift given by God for the sake of relationship, care, and love.

Naming, the act of signifying importance and personhood, for us and for God, is an act of nurturing and tending. God does not understand relationships as a way to have power over others.

This is why God establishes covenants throughout Scripture. Covenants are spoken ways of establishing relationships grounded in the intentions of God's creation itself.

Language is not for controlling or manipulating one another. When Adam names the animals, he establishes what God intends, a relationship of care, nurture and tending. A Creation Consciousness grounded in covenant means the very words we use, the very actions we do, the deepest ways of our being, are governed by care and nurture, tending and love. Since this awareness and this language is the warp and weft of Creation itself, how we say things matters. In Scripture, this awareness matters so much that sometimes the names of people change. Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul.

The way in which we signify the person in scripture sometimes has to change because the signified has changed so much she or he needs a new signifier, a new name.

Jesus doesn't change his name, but he lays claim to other names. Jesus lays claim to the name of God, which does not sit well at all with the ruling authorities of the day.

In John 8, Jesus says he knows God but the religious authorities do not. At the end of a deep theological argument, Jesus says,

Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM (Jn 8:58).

This begins a whole bunch of "I AM" statements by Jesus throughout the Gospel of John. Isn't it fascinating that Jesus reframes, recasts, recapitulates, renames the world by renaming God, by expanding on the name God gave to Moses?

After Jesus says these things, after he uses names and language to recreate the world, we are provided a very different understanding of creation, God, language, and relationships.

Jesus says, "*I AM the bread of life*". Jesus says, "*I AM the light of the world*". Jesus says, "*I AM the gate for the sheep*". He says, "*I AM the good shepherd*". He says, "*I AM the true vine*." These are all names, ways of speaking that are nurturing, tending, loving, caring. Jesus is not using power language. Jesus is deliberately changing the very way religious people use language.

In this Jesus way of speaking, there is no control or power over or force. In this way of using words, there is only love, guidance, care, nurture. The language can be shocking, especially when it has been hundreds of years since the words have been used in that way. The words can be like a burning bush that is not consumed, an experience so strange, you know you are on holy ground.

Knowing this, why would we ever use the other "I AM" names Jesus uses for himself and God for anything other than love, guidance, care, and nurture? When Jesus says, "*I AM the resurrection and the life*", this name is in the context of that very first act of speaking, of language, when God said, "*Let there be light*". "*I AM the resurrection and the life*" is a word, a name of goodness, creativity, and relationship, not of power over or coercion. It is a naming which lifts up the resilience of Creation. When Jesus says, "*I AM the way, the truth, and the life*", this name is in the context of the reconciliation that is woven into Creation itself.

This is not a word that is set over and against other ideas or beliefs in the world. Instead, it is a language of guidance and gentleness meant to evoke the good, relational, and creative order of the language of Creation itself.

When God gives Moses the name out there in the desert, it is because God only knows goodness, creativity, relationship, resilience, and reconciliation. This is the language of the world we live in.

These are the words we use to tell our story. The name of God – “*I AM that who I AM*” – is the name which ignites the spoken creation into the fulfillment of God’s desires for each of us to love, nurture and care for creation and one another. The words we use to do this matter. The language that forms our reality changes things and us. Naming and hearing names can be lonely work, but it is also relational, loving, nurturing work.

So speak well, listen deeply to what has been said, and in the words and names and language of creation itself find God’s loving, nurturing, caring voice which has spoken you into being. Amen.

Here is a poem by a Congregational minister in Bridgewater, Connecticut:

I AM I AM: ACCORDING TO DR. SEUSS

BY W. ALAN FROGGATT

*I Am I Am, I Am I Am,
What kind of name is I Am I Am?
A name that follows here and there
A name which leads me, who knows where?
Just answer the question of Moses man:
What kind of name is I Am I Am?*

*Once I could call Egypt home,
but now have been condemned to roam
For anger made me kill a man,
and hide his body in the sand.
In the wilderness I live—
Moses, desert fugitive ...
Expatriate upon the lam,
Until I met I Am I Am.
Despite my guilt, I thought I'd leave,
and ask the Pharaoh for reprieve;
I thought I might return to Cush
when I Am lit the burning bush.*

*"Take off your shoes!"—the words resound—
'For where you stand is sacred ground;
'My Son," he said, "I have a chore,
and thus to you do I implore:
Moses, free my little band
and bring them out of Egypt's land.
Pharaoh's forgotten Little Joe,
but he must let my people go.*

*Tell Egypt's king I am the Lord,
and he'll forever be abhorred
If he won't free the Hebrew slaves,
for I am always one who saves."
Quickly came my first reply—
I had the perfect alibi:³*

As theologian Randall Pannell puts it,

"YHWH can and will be known by Israel; this knowledge will be the basis of the (covenant) relation between the two; but this knowledge will not be the basis of either controlling or manipulating YHWH."⁴

The way, the truth and the life by John Clare

*I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes—
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes*

*And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed
Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.*

*I long for scenes where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below—above the vaulted sky.⁵*

³ W. Alan Froggatt is the minister of the Bridgewater Congregational Church, Bridgewater, Connecticut. He is interpreting the text, Exodus 3:14, in the style of "Dr. Seuss" (Theodore Seuss Geisel, d. Sept. 25, 1991).

⁴ From an article "I Would Be Who I Would Be" by Randall Pannell. Found in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16.2 (2006) 351-353. Accessed 9/28/17.

⁵ The Way, The Truth and the Life by John Clare, found at www.theculturium.com/john-clare-i-am/. Accessed 9/29/17