

“What’s in a Name?”
Isaiah 62:1-5

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For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ²The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. ³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. ⁵For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

I want to begin today by inviting you to think back about eight years. Or for some of you it might be about twenty-seven years. A few more will have to think back, oh, forty-some years. Maybe fifty-five, maybe somewhere north of sixty. A handful of you are going to have to think back a full three quarters of a century or more. I want you to think back—or imagine back, I suppose—to that moment in this life when you received your name. Chances are pretty good that none of us can remember that particular moment. Some of you might have been named long before you drew your first breath. Others arrived in this world nameless until someone took a good, long look in those baby eyes and said, “Yep, she’s a Nancy.”

Maybe you were named with a family name, or maybe your parents got creative. Last month the Huffington Post put out a piece highlighting some of the more unusual baby names given in 2012. Girls came into the world with names like “Sesame,” “flair,” “Sanity,” “Shoog,” and “Yoga.” The boys’ names were a little more outlandish. Boys arrived as “Hippo,” “Jedi,” “Thunder,” “Google,” “Espn,” “Mango,” and “Burger.” We can only imagine the names these parents *didn’t use*. “Yeah, we were going to name him ‘Ketchup,’ but then at the last minute we said to ourselves, *Nope, he’s a ‘Burger.’*”

For the most part, your name was a gift you had no choice but to receive and carry with you wherever you went. That’s how names work, most of the time. Some of us have our names changed, officially or unofficially. “Catherine” becomes “Kate.” “William” becomes “Bill.” Some of us go through legal channels. A friend of Karla’s and mine in seminary changed her name from “Linda” to “Afri Alelani.”

We human beings actually have a long history of changing our names. In Genesis, Abram’s name was changed to “Abraham” “father of many nations.” In Ruth, Naomi (which meant “pleasant, sweet”) changed her name to “Mara” or “bitter” when her life fell apart, and then, fortunately changed it back to “Naomi” again. Jesus changes Simon’s name to “Peter” “The Rock,” in the book of Acts, “Saul” becomes “Paul.” And my favorite: in Genesis 35, Rachel names Jacob’s twelfth son “Ben-oni” or “Son of My Pain” as she dies in childbirth, but Jacob renames him, “Son of My Right Hand,” or “Benjamin.”

Proverbs 22 says that “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,” A change in name in scripture *indicates a change in identity*. In today’s passage, the prophet Isaiah comforts the

people with the news that they “shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.” This comes in Isaiah 62, which is part of the third movement in the book of Isaiah, a movement which finds the people of God having returned from Babylonian exile to find Jerusalem’s temple destroyed and their homeland in ruins.

Imagine returning to your home to find it burned down. Or imagine the evacuees returning to the east coast after Hurricane Sandy. This was that kind of homecoming—when no matter where you look, the gut-wrenching questions linger in the air, “How could this have happened?” and “Where do we go from here?” The people of Israel were devastated. They called themselves “Azubah”—“Forsaken,” and they called their land “Shemamah”—“Desolate.”

Now it’s one thing to say that you’re sad. It’s quite another to tell all your friends, “Call me ‘Sadness,’ because that is who I am.” Sometimes our emotions become us. Sometimes our very identity grows out of the experiences we’ve had. Isaiah’s people were in that particular place of feeling so forsaken by God that they *named themselves* “Forsaken.” They even changed the name of their *land*. “Just call it *what it is*,” they said. “Desolate.”

On long car trips when we were growing up, my brother and I would study the atlas trying to find the worst names for cities. We laughed at Flushing, New York and Accident, Maryland. It never occurred to us that there might have been some sad stories leading folks to name their towns Dead Horse, Alaska, Dismal, Tennessee, or Hell, Michigan.

Our faith ancestors called themselves “Forsaken” and they called their home, “Desolate.” Where do you go from there? Once you’ve named yourself “Forsaken,” what’s next? Once you’ve changed your name to “Friendless,” or “Broken,” or “Never Happy Again,” what’s your next step in life? That happens to us from time to time. You wouldn’t write it on a nametag: “HELLO, my name is Never Good Enough,” but that doesn’t mean that you haven’t taken on a new name in your head and in your heart. What do you do when your name is “Mud”?

Hopefully you have a prophet in your life, a truth-teller to sit with you and love you and identify for you *a new name*. This is what Isaiah does for the people of God. He says to them, “I know that you are Forsaken, but your new name shall be “Heff-zi-bah,” which means, “My Delight Is In Her.” And your land shall be called “Beulah,” which means, “Married.” The power in this story is that God does not immediately restore Israel’s fortunes. There’s no magic wand in Isaiah, no instant recovery, no sweeping reformation. Instead, God gives the people a new identity, *which may be even more of a miracle*.

I’ve been reading Father Gregory Boyle’s book, *Tattoos on the Heart*. It’s the story of his work with gang members and former gang members in Los Angeles. His ministry, this gang-intervention agency, is called “Homeboy Industries” and its motto is “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.” They’ve been on the front lines for decades now, and today they run Homeboy Bakery, Homegirl Café, Homeboy Silk Screen, Homeboy Maintenance, Homeboy Merchandise and, the latest, Homeboy Solar Panel Installers. Through it all, they welcome gang members from off the street, keep them safe, and offer them a new way to live—a new *name*.

When Richard, a nineteen-year-old boy, entered Father Boyle's office, his name was "Constant Sorrow." His story was not unlike that of others who had grown up too quickly in that violent culture. Gang initiation at an early age, multiple brushes with death, trouble with the police... Now a young man, he was hopeful to make a new start, but he didn't know how.

One day, Richard appeared in Father Boyle's office *with a picture of himself in his hands*. It was a small, tattered black-and-white, no more than an inch square. Boyle looked at the photo—a 10-year-old version of the boy. "There seem[ed] to be no story to the photograph beyond just finding it," Boyle writes. Maybe it was the only childhood picture of himself that Richard had. On three separate occasions, Richard wandered into Father Boyle's office with the photo. Finally, he put it down on the priest's desk. "D'ya think there is any way to make it big?" he asked.

Father Boyle took the photo, knowing what this meant to the young man. Bringing it to the local camera store, he asked the person behind the counter to enlarge it. But the photo was grainy and unfocused to begin with, and the clerk was having his doubts. "Sir," said Father Boyle, "you have to make this photograph larger than it is." So the clerk worked his magic and, in the end, managed to produce a 4x4 print, still grainy, but you could tell that it was Richard.

"Richard beamed as he held the enlarged, framed, finished product. This is not a story of a photograph," writes Father Boyle, "It is the story of the self, made to feel too small from being bombarded with messages of shame and disgrace... so we reach in, dismantle the message, and rearrange the language." *We give a new name.*

What's your name today? When you stop and think about it, what's your name this morning? Maybe your name today is "Busy," "Overscheduled," or "Burnt Out." Or maybe your name these days is "Alone," "Lost," "Adrift." Is your name, "Judging Myself," "Sick," or "Hiding from the Truth?" We take on names and are given names all the time—names that come from places of fear and untruth—names that drag us down. "Unloveable," "Ugly," "Wrong."

The Good News, friends, is that we worship a God who is in the business of creating new names for us! Names that speak to our beauty, to God's potential in us, to our identity *AS IT IS KNOWN IN CHRIST*.

And perhaps God has a new name for you this morning. Look in your pews, behind the paperback hymnals, and find a sheet with four nametags on it. Pick one of those new names for yourself, and pass it on. Choose for yourself a *new name*. Choose and receive a new name. "Wisdom," "Patience," "Apple of God's Eye," "Confidence..." Choose and receive a new name.

The Peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ Be with You. **And also with you.** Let us now stand and turn to one another as God's children who have been loved, forgiven, and renamed. Let us celebrate our new names as we share the peace of Christ!