

God's B-Team: Maher-shalal-hash-baz

Part 6 of a Series

Isaiah 8:1-15

Acts 13:4-12

What's In a Name?

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The furor around Super-chef Paula Deen's use of racially-charged language has reminded both her and us that words matter. Names matter. It would have been better had she just said, "I'm sorry; it was wrong; it will never happen again." Instead, her multiple apologies were accompanied by excuses and posturing as a victim. She might have seized the occasion to confront lingering racism and bigotry in our culture; instead she ducked the issue and fled. Words matter, names matter, and we have been reminded of it.

What about this name that the prophet Isaiah gave his second-born, *Mahe-shalal-hash-baz*? That's a mouthful, and a burdensome moniker to stick a child with, even 2700 years ago. The ancient Hebrew is not as clear here as it might be, and the historic context complicated, and commentators are more clear on the words of the name than what it means when you put those words together. Some just list words: "Spoil, speed, prey, hasten." Old Testament scholar John Bright may be closer in translating it: "Spoil hastens, plunder comes quickly."¹ A more modern translation might be "*Robbery in Progress*." *Mahe-shalal-hash-baz*. All we know about him is his name. And what's in a name?

Let's put this child in context. His father, Isaiah, "towered over the scene," as Bright puts it, "and more than any other individual guided the nation through her hour of tragedy and crisis."² His mother was a prophet herself. But Isaiah was sinking in the public opinion polls and crosswise with King Ahaz of Judah. Long after Kings David and Solomon, Israel was split into two kingdoms – Israel and Judah, with Judah and its capitol of Jerusalem being the ongoing faith center of the covenant people. It is where the Temple was. To the north, Israel was allying with Aram (Damascus, present-day Syria) against Judah. King Ahaz and his people were afraid, and sought help from the mighty Assyrian Empire to the east. The capitol city was Ninevah (near present-day Mosul in far northern Iraq on the Turkish border), where the emperor Tiglath-Pileser, who was all too glad to have a willing vassal state in the area.

Isaiah wanted to get the attention of the king of Judah. He had a son and (following God's instructions) named the boy *Mahe-shalal-hash-baz*. Which translates to: *Coming Down Like a Ton of Bricks*. His point to the king was this – "Do not be too quick to give away the store. Assyria is going to take out Israel and Aram anyway, and soon, no matter what you do. Don't be afraid of the northern coalition. Instead, trust God." Isaiah lamented that the people thought so little of their home resources (which he compared to the gentle stream of Shiloah that flowed at Jerusalem), and that they were so eager to ally with the uncontrollable power of Assyria (which he compared to the raging waters of the Euphrates). "This will come back to drown you," he said. "Fear God, not the northern coalition. God is your help in trouble."

Ahaz was fearful, and did *not* trust or believe. He sent tribute to the Assyrian emperor, and surrendered his independence. Isaiah, his advice rejected, swore out a legal will, in front of witnesses, as a record of his prophecies, and did so at the same time as naming his child, also naming his child as heir to the deed: To "*Here Comes the Cliff*!" The child was a living symbol of his father's prophecy, Isaiah warned: "Do not call difficult all this people calls difficult, or fear what they fear." In the end, the enemies of the people of God would not accomplish their aims, because God's aims are different, and God is still Lord of History.

Retired Columbia Seminary professor Walter Brueggemann wrote about the prophets that they had an unusual degree of imagination, they “understood the strange congruence of public conviction and personal yearning. Most of all they understood the distinctive power of language, the capacity to speak in ways that evoke newness *fresh from the word*”³ (as the line in our opening hymn today). Isaiah’s imagination was dramatic, down to giving his son the name of the crisis facing the nation, in order to get the nation’s attention. Isaiah offered his son as a symbol, brought to public speech the unspoken public fear, and spoke both metaphorically and tangibly about the looming state of affairs for Israel. But he did another thing – he offered to trade their despair for the language of hope. Jesus did these things also. He spoke of real sin and real peril, and did not leave us there in fear, but offered another way.

Luke, the author of our New Testament passage from Acts 13, seems to be almost playing with names. Saul (soon to be called Paul) and Barnabas were on a missionary journey to Cyprus, where Barnabas is from. They met a magician named Bar-Jesus, who worked for the Roman proconsul – like a regional governor. Luke writes that the magician’s name translates as Elymas, but it does not. Bar-Jesus means “Son of Jesus”, or Son of “God Saves.” Elymas in Greek may be a quiver, a small case or a millet grain. In any case, Elymas found Saul and Barnabas threatening because Barnabas and Saul converted the proconsul, whose name is Sergius Paulus, to the faith. From then on, Saul was called Paul – like the Roman. Nobody really knows what this comedy of names means, I don’t believe.

“What’s in a name?” asked Shakespeare’s Juliet. “That which we call a rose would by any other name smell as sweet.”⁴ Juliet is saying it is what a thing *is* that matters, not what it is called. Is she correct? When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, and God sent him back to confront Pharaoh and bring the people out of Egypt, Moses questioned God, saying, “They’re going to ask who sent me. What shall I say your name is?” God did not exactly answer, and instead said: “I am who I am.” (Or “I will be who I choose to be.”)

On the other side, fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin wrote of one of her characters that “he saw that in this dusty and fathomless matter of learning the true name of each place, thing and being, the power he wanted lay like a jewel at the bottom of a dry well. For magic consists in this, the true naming of a thing.”⁵ And at the beginning of Creation, God called things into being by speaking their name – “Let there be... Light,” and then gave Adam a feeling of ownership in the project by letting him name the animals. For author of the Harry Potter tales, JK Rowling, names are important. About the story’s villain, good wizard Dumbledore says: “Call him Voldemort, Harry! Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”⁶

We put some value in names. On Nordstrom’s web site, a pair of Pierre Balmain men’s jeans costs \$500. Similar-looking Levi’s costs \$28.98. Which means (I suppose) that to someone it is worth \$471 to have Pierre Balmain’s name on their butt. I wouldn’t know Pierre from Adam’s housecat, so it is not worth that to me. But I was intrigued that I could get “True Religion” for \$288, a deal at twice the price, don’t you think?

Russian History professor Catherine Merridale writes that “Peasant religion. . .included elements that formal (church) doctrine did not mention. . .a dying person might change his name with his last breath. The angels, after all, used lists that gave the Christian names of every sinner in their care. A freshly renamed person would be as innocent in the eyes of God as new baby.”⁷ Just change your name and you are good to go through the Pearly Gates, yes?

Cynical media strategists have learned to name a legislative bill or company policy the opposite of what it intends, to get it passed, e.g. the “Clear Skies Act” ten years ago, which increased by 42 million tons the amount of pollution our factories could put into the air. And we don’t “fire” people anymore, or even “lay them off,” we “right-size the company.” We don’t engage in torture, but rather “enhanced interrogation.” They act like we’re not paying attention. Oh.

Naming. Some of you may remember the drama troupe from New Orleans that we hosted here at First Presbyterian during NOLA’s efforts to rebuild after Hurricane Katrina. Their play was called, “The Name of the Rain,” and was about the Katrina experience. The title came from a line a child said to his mother; they had evacuated to an emergency shelter in Birmingham. It began to rain and hearing it on the roof he became frightened. “What is the name of *this* rain, Mommy?”

We just celebrated our nation’s Independence Day, as well we should have. We have named ourselves not only the United States of America, but “America” in an almost metaphorical sense. We have named ourselves the “Land of the free and the home of the brave,” and the “Land of opportunity.” The “City on a Hill,” and a “light to the nations.” At the same time, we talk about building a wall on our borders to keep out those nations, we have banks “too big to fail,” spend almost uncountable dollars on war while we double the interest rate on college student debt. We celebrate an “economic recovery” because Wall Street makes money, while unemployment is high and stagnant, and the homeless shelters in Birmingham are full, in the summertime, no beds. They made a mistake in Junior High Civics classes, because they taught us to believe in liberty, justice and opportunity. It is not fair to now call us unpatriotic when we ask when all that is going to happen, and when we are going to be done with too many wars, too many secrets.

Isaiah, indeed all the Biblical prophets, found themselves on the outs with public opinion and political power. But as Brueggemann said, “The task of prophetic ministry is to evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to that of the dominant culture around us.”⁸ Isaiah did that through a radical act of the imagination, naming his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which translates to, “*We are in So Much Trouble...*”, although I’ll bet they never called him that in school. Brazilian theologian Rubem Alvez says that the practice of imagination is a subversive activity not because it yields concrete acts of defiance (it may), but it keeps the present provisional and refuses to absolutize it.⁹ That means that when there have been 13 murders in our city in the last 2 weeks, we do not have to accept that as the status quo. We do not have to accept that poor and rural communities cannot have good education for our kids. That’s a provisional reality now, not an ultimate reality.

We are not bound. The social purpose of a transcendent God, said Old Testament scholar Mendenhall, is to have a court of appeal against the highest courts and orders of society around us.¹⁰ The *real* Biblical witness is the one that contests social norms and realities, not reinforces them. God sent us the true Word, the defining metaphor of what the world should be like, given to us by the One who *made* the world – Jesus Christ. Isaiah named his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which translates as *Houston, We Have a Problem*. What *we* do is rehearse and practice the self-giving love of Christ Jesus at this table when we break bread and share one cup. We are to be about love, justice, and sacrificial love. At the end of the day, before we are Democrats, Republicans, Americans, or any nationality or allegiance, we are Christians, citizens first of the Kingdom of God, where there is grace and peace in community, and the last shall be first.

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- ¹ Bright, John. A History of Israel, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1974, p. 289.
- ² *Ibid*, p. 288.
- ³ Brueggemann, Walter. The Prophetic Imagination, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978, p. 9.
- ⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II.
- ⁵ Le Guin, Ursula. A Wizard of Earthsea, Parnassus Press, NJ, 1968, p. 59.
- ⁶ Rowling, J.K. Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Levine Books, NY, 1997, p. 298.
- ⁷ Merridale, Catherine. *Night of Stone: Death & Memory in 20th Century Russia*, Penguin, NY, 2002 pp. 37-38
- ⁸ *op cit* Brueggemann, p. 13.
- ⁹ Alvez, Rubem. Tomorrow's Child, Harper & Row, NY, 1972.
- ¹⁰ Mendenhall, George. *Social Organization in Ancient Israel*, Magnalia Dei, Doubleday, NY, 1976, pp 132-151.