

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 9, 2022

1 Epiphany, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#)

[Acts 8:14-17](#)

[Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

[Psalm 29](#)

+ + +

What name do those who love you most call you?

It might be the name on your driver's license or birth certificate. Or it might not. You might go by different names to different people. I, for example, have never in my life gone by Steve as a nickname. It's just not my name; I've always been a Stephen. And yet for some reason my younger sister and brother call me Steve, and it sounds completely different to my ears: not the conventional nickname Steve, just a family love-shortening of my name, the same way it was when they were babies and called me Ste-Ste. So they can call me Steve, and no one else does.

In *Romeo and Juliet* Juliet says, "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." And in a way she's right: names can be pretty arbitrary. They're just clusters of sounds to identify a person. But in reality the names of Montague and Capulet that she and Romeo carry matter deeply.

You might have loved ones that call you by a pet name, and if they ever call you by your ordinary formal name, that means they're mad at you. On the other hand, you might have fought hard to be called by a certain name, and people might need to use that ordinary formal name to show they respect you and care for you. People who immigrate to a new country sometimes go by two names, maybe using one for convenience and another for those who really know them.

When our oldest daughter was baptized, not only were several other people baptized that day, but also one young person was going through a naming ceremony. He was a young man who was claiming his name as Sam, after spending his childhood being called another name, a girl's name. Sam had come to know himself as a transgender man, and in the Episcopal parish where we worshiped, the clergy had worked with him and his parents to craft a rite that would not be in any way a repetition of his baptism—for he had already been baptized once and for all, adopted as God's child and bestowed the gift of the Spirit—but would renew that baptismal covenant in the light of his newly claimed identity and new name. Which on the one hand was something fresh and new: the church affirming and honoring a young trans person and walking with them in the light of God's calling. And yet on the other hand it was nothing new at all, for the church has been giving people new names for centuries, like when people make a profession to religious life. I knew a person named Tom who became a monastic and was known after that as Brother Basil. So names indeed can change.

In the service of baptism from the previous version of the Episcopal prayer book, the version from 1928, there's a line right before the baptism where the priest says, "Name this child." You still sometimes hear clergy say that even though it's not a part of the current prayer book. And people sometimes have the idea that baptism

is a rite of naming. In reality people are usually baptized with the name they already have. But it's not a completely wrong idea, because baptism does have to do with being known by name, and being called by the name God knows us by.

“Fear not,” says God in the book of Isaiah, “for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine.” It's a promise to the people of Israel not only that they are known by name but that they are called by God's name. The name of God is something very important in the Hebrew Bible. To Moses God reveals a sacred name, a name that means something like “I am who I am,” but that in Hebrew is considered so sacred that it's never spoken out loud, and to this day it's not spoken out loud. Rather it's substituted with the word “Adonai,” which means “The Lord.” But other words are also used for God, like the word “El,” which is where we get “Israel,” which means “one who wrestles with God.” A name given to the ancient patriarch Jacob after he indeed wrestled with God's angel through the night. What an incredible calling, to be a people who wrestle with God.

When Jesus was baptized, he heard the voice of God, his Father, speaking to him. And like in many families, God didn't call him by his formal name, Jesus. God called him “Son.” “You are my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Or, in another translation, “in whom I take delight.” I've heard one commentator say we could render this phrase as, “You are the one who makes my face light up.”¹ That's the name God gives Jesus in his baptism. Child of God. Beloved. The one in whom I take delight.

¹ Jim Somerville, “Identity Statement,” A Sermon for Every Sunday, January 12, 2020; <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Jim-Somerville-the-Baptism-of-Jesus-edited.pdf> (accessed January 7, 2022).

And that's the name we inherit when we are baptized in turn into Jesus.

Today we celebrate not just the Baptism of Christ, in the sense of Jesus Christ getting baptized, but also the Baptism of Christ, in the sense of the baptism that Jesus Christ shares with each of us. When Jesus came to the Jordan River to be baptized at the hands of John, the Holy Spirit descended on him in power to anoint him as God's Messiah. And when each of us comes to the water, whether it's a river, a lake, a font in a church, or even a few drops poured from a sterile bottle in an intensive care unit, we get joined with the same Jesus, and the same Holy Spirit descends on us to incorporate us into God's Messiah.

There's a wonderful passage in the book of Revelation where Jesus says, "To everyone who conquers I will give a white stone, and on that stone is written a name that no one knows except the one who receives it" (Rev. 2:17). It's as if to say that God knows each of us by name so deeply that none of the names we have ever been called in this life are enough; that there's a secret and hidden name that truly conveys the fullness of who we are, and in God's good time we will receive it. It's a powerful vision. Yet the God who knows us so fully then also knows us already now. And in another way, in Jesus we already have the only name we will ever need: the name of Beloved. "You are my child," God says; to Jesus; to me; to you. "You are my child, my beloved; in whom I am well pleased"; the one in whom I take delight; the one who makes my face light up.