

Sermon – January 15, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

John 1:29-42

Hello, I'm Dan Hollis, I'm 5' 10", I'm based out of York, Maine, and I'll be auditioning for the role of Juliet.

'Tis but thy *name* that is my enemy;
thou art *thyself* though, *not* a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
belonging to a man. O! be some *other* name:
What's in a *name*? That which we call a rose
by any other name would smell as sweet;
So *Romeo* would, were he not Romeo call'd,
retain that dear perfection which he owes
without that title. Romeo, *doff* thy name;
and *for* that name, which is no part of thee,
take all myself.

Thank you.

What struck me about today's Scripture reading was just how much it revolves around names. "What's in a name?" First, John the baptizer gives Jesus *two* different names, then the disciples give him two *more*, the narrator slips in an *extra* two in parentheses, and in the end, Jesus gives the disciple *Simon* his *own* new name... which the narrator immediately translates into *another* new name.

It is the historic pursuit of Christianity: trying to *name* Jesus. To *define* him. To make *sense* of him. To *label* Jesus, and in so doing *encapsulate* who he was and what he *is* to all of us. It's how our minds *work* as humans. *Naming* something—putting it in a jar with a label on it—that's how we wrap our heads around things.

Genesis says it's like the first thing the first human ever did. "So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." And in countless tales of myth and folklore, if you knew something's name, you had power over it.

When the miller's daughter guessed the evil Rumpelstiltskin's name, he was devoured by a fiery chasm. When proud Odysseus told the defeated cyclops *his* name, the cyclops was finally able to *curse* Odysseus with all the power of Poseidon.

Names give us power, or perhaps the illusion of power. They help us to understand things that are too big for words, but they aren't always enough. We give Jesus names like "Christ," and "Immanuel." Our reading today recounts names like "Lamb of God" and "Son of God" and "Rabbi" and "Teacher" and "Messiah."

The names we give Jesus *each* tell us something *important* about who he was and who he can be to *us*, but the best way to get to *know* Jesus is not just by *naming* him, but through the way you *relate* to him. Your *relationship* with Jesus, and his relationship with *you*... *that's* where it all comes together. The only way to wrap your head around Jesus... is to wrap your *arms* around him.

John the baptizer—or, as some call him, John the Baptist—had a complicated history with names.

There were a lot of people in John's time who had some big ideas about who he was. Some thought he was the promised Messiah who would save them all, some thought he was the ancient prophet Elijah who had never died and actually ascended to heaven in a tornado, and some thought he was the reincarnation of Isaiah or some *other* influential prophet from the Hebrew Bible.

So right off the bat, in its very first chapter, the Gospel of John—which was named after a *different* John—recounts John the *baptizer* saying in no uncertain terms: "I am not the Messiah.' And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.'" *I* am not worthy to untie the *sandals* of the Messiah.

So what does Messiah *mean*, anyway? The Hebrew word we pronounce "messiah" has long meant "anointed one," someone who was so special as to be consecrated by a ritualistic application of holy oil. Then, during the time of the Babylonian Exile, some of the deported Jewish people began to look forward to the promise of a messiah to *come*. Someone who would be a true heir to King David, and would restore their world and fulfill God's promises to a lost people.

It's *that* hope that the earliest followers of Jesus saw *answered* in this carpenter's son born in Bethlehem. So they called him *the* Messiah. Now the New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *messiah* is "Khristos," which is where, in English, we get *Christ*. So when we call Jesus "Messiah" or "Christ," we're referring to him as the *fulfillment* of God's promises. Promises to heal, reconcile, liberate, and transform our world.

Funnily enough, in Greek the first letter of "Khristos" is the letter X, which is why "Christmas" is sometimes abbreviated "X-mas." So I'm a firm believer in keeping the X in Xmas.

Now the disciples *also* called him Rabbi. Teacher. In that time, you would sit at a Rabbi's feet to learn about the wisdom of God. You would go where the Rabbi went, and hang on the Rabbi's every word. When the disciples call him Rabbi, they remind us that Jesus isn't *only* a magical figure that *arrived* on this world to... do miracles, cause wonders, catalyze a worldwide transformation, and then *disappear* into the Heavens above. Jesus came to *do* all those things, sure, but he was also a *teacher*.

We *minimize* Jesus when we *only* think of him as cosmic and transcendent, or as an incident that just *happened*. He is all that, but he was also a dude that walked around and put his sandals on one foot at a time and *did* things and *taught* how to do things. How to *live*. When we call Jesus "Teacher," we remind ourselves that his words and his actions are *just* as important as his divinity. Reading, and seeking *understanding* of his words, is *such* an important part of our relationship with Jesus, as is the *example* in the ways he lived his life. The things he did, and the people for whom he did them. With every act he performed and every word he spoke, Jesus was *teaching*, and it's on *us* to listen at his feet.

And of course the names "Messiah" and "Teacher" don't stand alone. There's John's declaration of Jesus as "Lamb of God," an offering of sustenance and protection against death and sin. It's an image that goes all the way back to God instructing the Israelites in Egypt to smear lamb's blood on their doorposts before eating the lamb, to protect against the last of the ten plagues: the plague of death.

Then in the Christmas season we sing "Immanuel," a name which means "God-with-us," and reminds us that Jesus was God in human form, fully human and fully divine, and it reminds us of all that that *means* for our *relationship* with God. In the words of Athanasius, "God became human that we might become divine."

Then there's the title "Prince of Peace," which reminds us that Jesus did not come to conquer with a *sword* or at the head of armies, but to herald a *new* way. There's "Savior" and "Lord" and "Redeemer" and "bread of life," all names that tell us something about who Jesus is, and who he can be to us. And *so* many more that people have spent *centuries* unpacking. "Son of God," "son of man," "logos," "the Word," "King of Kings," "Lord of Lords," it's names all the way down. And they're *helpful*... but a name is just a word with a capital letter. And with something like Jesus, "the Word" is not enough.

I want to read you a reminder from one of the first books I read in seminary: Daniel Migliore's "Faith Seeking Understanding."

The living Jesus Christ is greater than all of our confessions and creeds, and he surpasses all of our theological reflection about him. The risen Lord continually

upsets our neat categories and classifications of him and the salvation he brings.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. “You are the Christ,” Peter correctly replies. But in the next moment, when Jesus says that he must suffer and die to do the Father’s will, Peter resists Jesus and shows that his previous understanding of him as the Christ is in need of correction. No Christology can claim to exhaust the breadth and depth of the mystery of Christ.

In the same way, *I* would add that no *name* can *encapsulate* the breadth and depth of the mystery of Christ. We may call Jesus “Messiah” or “Teacher” or “Lamb of God” or “Son of God” or even “Christ,” but no title, no label will ever be adequate.

Only your heart can know what Christ is, and your heart speaks with words that cannot be told.

And the only way your heart can know *anything* about Jesus, is the same way your heart learns anything... through relationship. Connection. Reaching out and *touching*. The relationship that *you* have with Jesus will *become* how you name him. *My* words, or the words of any preacher you see on television or hear on the radio, or the words of any theologian in any textbook, or even the great and sacred words of the Holy Bible itself... will never be *enough* to *hold* Jesus in your hand.

No words can ever truly do him justice. No *words* can do *justice* to what he reaches out to *promise* you. No words can do justice to what he can *be* for you.

So why am I still talking?

Go and find out for yourself. Amen.