

Blessed with a Name

Identity and the blessing of God

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Holy Name | Numbers 6:22-27

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Andrew

I don't know how old I was. Maybe 8 or 9. Around my daughter's age when I first learned what my name meant. And later where it came from.

Andrew, from the Greek (Andreas) means "strong". But I haven't always felt strong. Not in middle school or high school. Or even college.

I wasn't known for my strength, though I might've looked the part. 6'3 / 190 then. A few more pounds north of 200 now.

I remember a school to Grayling, visiting with students from another high school. We were waiting between events and one of them said that he didn't want to say the wrong thing: I might beat him up. I was the biggest kid in the room.

My friends laughed. "No, not Drew."

They knew me on the inside.

On the outside, I was big and strong. And going through the teenage mood swings, I was also mopey and talking tough.

But that isn't who I was or am. I am a pacifist and a peacemaker. An enneagram 9.

And my teenage self struggled with this inner/outer strength, this sense of identity which I believed with all my heart. But I knew others didn't see it that way. And their beliefs threatened my beliefs about myself. That strength is only external. Is only measured in aggression and muscles.

I felt/feel the eternal juxtaposition of strength outer/inner, the power to hurt and the strength to resist.

My name has governed my very sense of reality. It always has.

The First Apostle

Ten years ago, a spiritual counsellor gave me incredible advice.

After listening to my story and taking all sorts of ministry and personality tests, we discussed everything. And he suggested I think more about my name. Or more directly, the name I share with the apostle.

Andrew is the brother of Simon Peter. In John's gospel Andrew is the first disciple. And more importantly, he's the one that brings Peter to Jesus.

Now, he isn't Peter. He's his brother. And he brings Peter to the incarnate Word, to Jesus, the Christ.

He's the brother. Not the one, but the one without whom the real one can't be the one.

Like Aaron, sharing the load with Moses. Carrying out the message of God. Priest and leader of the people.

So Andrew's my guy. But it isn't just him. It's our name. The name he and I share. The name given to us and lifted up to God as given.

Like it says in our reading from Numbers: "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

The name is important. But the naming is where the power comes.

God gives us a name to use.

Several names, actually. Names to indicate God. Perhaps none are really God's actual name. But they are names for our use.

One name in particular, given to Moses, is four letters. We transliterate those four letters

into english as YHWH, the Hebrew letters Y, H, W, H. It is known in Hebrew as the Tetragrammaton, which means "consisting of four letters."

We sometimes add vowels to make the name pronounceable: calling God Yahweh.

But the name itself is given such a holy place in Jewish tradition it is not spoken or written. Placeholders are put in the Bible's text for us so it doesn't print it. For the most part, we've inherited this practice, too.

You can see these placeholders because they're usually printed in capital letters, usually as LORD or GOD.

The name has been treated as powerful: as Moses and Aaron are told to share the name with people and act in the name.

But to tradition, the giving of the name has been a place of profound power. Because to know the divine name is to know who God really is.

So we think of that as we approach our passage from Numbers this morning:

Thus you shall bless the Israelites:
You shall say to them,

YHWH: bless you and keep you;
YHWH: make his face to shine upon
you, and be gracious to you;
YHWH: lift up his countenance upon
you, and give you peace.

So they shall put my name on the
Israelites, and I will bless them.

It isn't only the name that is significant, but the imparting of the name. God says to Moses and Aaron, "put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

The name doesn't bless, God blesses. But the imparting of the name changes them.

You might remember in our rite of baptism an opportunity to name the child. They are named and blessed and commissioned for service in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Given a name and blessed by the imparting of God's identity upon them.

We have the power to impart identity.

First and foremost to our children. We can do it directly or indirectly. Positively and negatively.

We remind our children that Downses don't hit. It isn't what we do. That's the positive identity forming.

And we try to remember that they hear a very different message when we say "you always screw up." We're imprinting a negative upon them.

We're constantly imprinting on them identity. We define their name for them. And so we want that to be a blessing, not a curse.

A blessing of strength. Of Wisdom and prophecy. A blessing of love and devotion. A blessing of hope and joy. A blessing of peacemaking and connection building.

A blessing of peace.

And we do this for one another. When we impart blessing or curse upon each other's identity. When we impart false motivations or narrow expectations. When we decry the blessedness of our difference or our creativity. Or when we name the beauty and ingenuity of these other children of God around us.

Today, as we celebrate the naming of Jesus: the imprinting of God's identity upon the infant savior in all his Jewishness and newborn humanness, we remember the blessing placed upon all of us. A blessing like this one:

YHWH: bless you and keep you;
YHWH: make his face to shine
upon you, and be gracious to you;
YHWH: lift up his countenance
upon you, and give you peace.

And may you bless one another as the children of God they are, imprinting the beauty and honor and graciousness of God as inspired peacemakers and kin-dom builders. A blessing already marked upon us in Christ. A mark of love and eternal devotion.