

Sermon 7-6-08 First Congregational Sonoma UCC
Rebecca Anderson, MDiv student at Pacific School of Religion in care with the NCNCUCC;
rlanderj@aol.com
Sermon Title *What's in a Name?*

Good morning. It is a joy for me to be here worshipping with you today. I trust you know how fortunate you are to have the Rev. Nancy Taylor as your pastor. What you may not know is how fortunate *I* feel to have her as my In-Care advisor as I continue my path toward ordained ministry. I am thankful for her ministry here with you, and for all of the ways it reaches into the wider world to touch others with God's compassionate love and care. Thank you for sharing her, and yourselves, in this ministry! And for inviting me to be here today!

Please pray with me- "May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen."

As I began preparing for this sermon, I spent some time with the scriptures the lectionary assigns for today - because I usually preach from the lectionary... but in all of those passages there was only one thing that caught my attention. It was, not surprisingly, the name Rebekah. *My name*, ... which shows up in the Genesis story of how Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife. At some other time, I'm sure I could find a meaningful message to share within that lectionary passage. However, my struggles with this story were not productive... except that they led me on a trail of exploration and discovery about names and naming in our relationships with the Holy, and to the texts I ultimately chose for us today. This morning I'd like to invite you to explore with me where *God* is in a name and in the process of naming; What can names and *naming* teach us about our relationships with one another and with the Holy?

What does a name tell us? What does a name say about us individually or collectively? What do names say about how we understand God? Names and naming are certainly important in the biblical stories of our faith. In the Hebrew tradition, the name of God is not spoken. Here it

is: Y-H-W-H- [show sign]. Some of you have seen this before, yes?. The Hebrew (old) Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann refers to this four-consonant term as the “ ‘proper name’ of the God of Israel,” while other names commonly used for God – like Elohim, Adonai or El Shaddai – are more generic names used for *any* deity. Brueggemann notes that pronunciation of this name [YHWH] “is an *intentional* bafflement.” He says “ The vowels to match the consonants are not given us in the tradition, and therefore the name is likely not intended to be pronounced, thus preserving the *mystery* of the name and the *freedom* of the one named.” Nonetheless, Brueggemann describes how the traditional Hebrew name for the God of Israel *has* actually *been* pronounced - by inserting vowels to form either *Jehovah*, which he calls “a complete misunderstanding yielding a nonword, bringing together vowels and consonants that cannot *possibly* belong together,” or *Yahweh* which he considers the result of ‘conjecture’ and “a Christian, scholarly convention” that is *offensive* to Orthodox Jews because it assumes a level of intimacy” with God that is “either impossible or blasphemous.” He goes on to note that some scholars link the origin of this name of God to the Hebrew verb “to be” – used in a form that means “to create”, but he also notes that this is “an explanatory attempt that does not penetrate the mystery of the God named or Israel’s intent in the naming,” and that “we *have* no acceptable, adequate way to pronounce the name.” He suggests that “The best approach is to write “Y-H-W-H-” and recognize that whatever oral expression is given is less than adequate, which is the *exact* intention...[because] the written “YHWH’ only makes sense to those who bring knowledge of the whole tradition ...” “Strangers who draw too close,” Brueggemann says, “are likely to reduce YHWH to something generic and therefore misunderstand and violate everything that is at stake in a name that remains beyond our ken.”

This tradition- of an unnamed and unnamable God- is one that continues to be honored by people of *many* faith traditions- and some, recognizing the wisdom of this tradition, have taken to writing the English word “God” without the “o” - to honor, in practice, the idea - that the name of the Holy One is *necessarily* unspeakable. [*flip sign to show this visually*]

*** Yet, followers of Jesus have long recognized the importance of naming. Think about the way name changes represent significant transformations for some of Jesus’ disciples: Saul’s road-to-Damascus- conversion, for example, seems to correspond with the gospels’ use of his new name, Paul; and Simon is named Peter by Jesus when he is called to follow...and, our current practice of the sacrament of infant baptism, which often includes naming, could be seen to carry on this pattern. Of course, naming ceremonies have been important in a *wide* range of religious and cultural traditions from time immemorial.[*pause*]

Some of you know that I used to work in Sonoma Valley as a naturalist and biologist. As I was training for that, pursuing a degree in biology, I learned just how important names are in *science*. Learning the names of animals and plants and other living things was a fascinating, and *telling* experience, [*pause*] *because* the way organisms are named by scientists indicates how science understands the relationships between organisms. So, for example, all of the true oak trees have “Quercus” as their “first name”. Although most people are more drawn to the *common* names we might use for a plant or animal or other critter (Sonoma Sunshine, Coyote, & lace lichen, for example), the scientific names are the ones that are standardized enough to be fairly reliable and consistent– allowing accurate information to be shared between scientists who speak different languages. Just as many biblical names are sourced in ancient languages, scientific names are typically based on Greek and Latin word roots. I learned a lot of scientific names over the years, and was regularly struck by how common names –although often helpful, informative,

and fun... can also be very misleading. When learning the scientific name of a plant for the first time, I realized that if I understood the meaning of the Latin or Greek word roots, I would remember these awkward sounding names a whole lot better. And it's true, I did. And in the process, I also learned many things about the plant (or animal or lichen, or what have you) - things I might never have known otherwise- because these names generally describe some *defining characteristic* of the organism. I recently heard a colleague preach an inspiring sermon about the Abraham, Sarah and Hagar story based on the same premise - that the *meanings* of these names contributes to our understanding of their story.

I am struck by the parallel between how scientists use names to indicate relationships, and the Scripture's insights into how naming is inherently relational. In the reading I chose from Genesis, we read: 'Then God said, "It is not good that Adam should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever he called every living creature, that was its name.'

A few things strike me about this passage. I notice, that in response to Adam's alone-ness, God first created the birds of the air and the creatures of the earth, and then wanted Adam to name each creature. I also notice that whatever *Adam* called a creature, *that* was the creature's name. [pause] The name was whatever *Adam* called it. Adam named these creatures in the process of seeking companionship. I notice what this passage says about God providing a companion for the *first* person, by *first* creating flying and crawling animals, rather than another human being.

{slowly} Adam's alone-ness was addressed by the Holy One's invitation to him to give name to the new forms of life he was shown. *Let me say that again:* Adam's alone-ness was

addressed by the Holy One's invitation to him to *give name to* the new forms of life he was shown. *[pause]* Remember what I said about scientific names being based on some defining characteristic of the organism? *Naming* is inherently a process of recognition and description, and as such, it's an act that *must* imply something about relationship. Isn't that what we do when we give names to others? *[slowly & with emphasis here]* There's something about naming that *binds* us in relationship to that which we name. Remember what Brueggemann said about this name (YHWH)? "the name is likely not intended to be pronounced, thus preserving the mystery of the name *and the freedom* of the one named". huh. *[pause]* There's something about naming that binds us – connects us - in relationship to that which we name. Perhaps that's why people of faith have never given up on the attempt to name the Mystery some of us call God.

In giving a name or calling by name, we establish, or reinforce, the parameters of our relationship with the other. Some names are titles that clearly articulate these relationships: daughter, mother, father, son, friend, lover, partner, husband, wife, beloved, child, auntie, grandma, ex-husband, ex-wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, pastor, counselor, landlord, Abba... Other words, when used to name, can be offensive, creating or reinforcing anger, hatred, bitterness, judgment or prejudice, often by merely emphasizing differences that *do not intrinsically* make any of us more or less valuable: Words like liberal, conservative, gay, straight, young, old, black, white, materialistic, spiritual, religious, idealistic, believer, unbeliever ... I'm sure you can think of many more. I'm going to say those words again, and this time, I invite you to listen to each of these words as though each word is a supreme insult *[slowly, pausing]: liberal, conservative, gay, straight, young, old, black, white, materialistic, spiritual, religious, idealistic, believer, unbeliever*. Now hear these words as though each is the highest form of complement *[slowly, pausing] liberal, conservative, gay, straight, young, old, black, white, materialistic, spiritual,*

religious, idealistic, believer, unbeliever. What assumptions might lie behind those feelings?

What is *different* about the kinds of relationships we create or reinforce depending upon *how* we *name* ourselves and others? [pause]

Even proper names can have stories that tell about how we are related, whether we were named for a blood relative, a family friend or simply for what our parents hoped for, or saw in us. Of course, not all names are chosen with this kind of intention- some just *sound* good- but, even that *good sound* can imply something about the relationship between the one named and the ones naming.

Finally, I think it is also important to notice in this Genesis story, that it is *Adam*, a human being, and not *God*, that is doing the naming. Adam, like each of *us*, must create his own relationship with the beings he encounters. Adam, like each of us, must determine the nature of those relationships, and identify and recognize them by naming, and by using and reinforcing – or *changing*- those named relationships in each interaction.

Think for a moment about your own names, or the names you often use for others. Why are *you* called what you are? Think of your legal name, the name your family calls you, or the name a friend uses for you. Are they the same, or different? Think about your beloved partner, or spouse, or a close friend or family member. What do *you* prefer to call that person? What do the names you use suggest about *your* relationships? [pause]

My name, Rebecca, was indeed inspired by the same biblical character whose story I opted *not* to have us read today... or so I like to believe. It is also a family name. I've heard stories about a great grandmother on my father's side, a feisty, intelligent woman my mother admired, who was also, I was told – some relation to Oliver Wendall Holmes. Her name was Rebecca. *I think*. It's a little hard to keep track of the stories of our family names – whether

we're talking about our families of origin or our faith families [pause]. It can also be hard to distinguish, after a couple of decades or generations, *which* stories about our names are based in 'stubborn fact' and which have moved into the realm of family mythology. *Either way*, these connections, these family histories can be important in shaping *who* we are and *how* we are with one another and with God.

Growing up, I had an older sister who could be unkind as she "Lorded it over" us younger children. My brothers and I responded with our own unkindnesses. One of them was to call her "Lizard breath" Like it or not (and Elisabeth *really* didn't), that name hovered in the background of our relationships for a long time... causing mirth for some, pain for others, and mostly reinforcing schisms between us that took a lot of growing up to heal.

In various religious and cultural traditions, a person may outgrow a childhood nickname and be given a different name as an adult, opt to use a more professional name, choose to go by a middle name in honor of a namesake...Or, change their name to indicate a new way of being in relationship with themselves, with others, or with God... or all of these. I'm thinking of a friend at school who goes by the name Monica. Monica is a transgender woman, who was born a man and lived as a man for most of her adult life. She began a family - as a man, came out later as a gay man, and then in her 40's began to transition into the woman she always felt herself to be. I've *never* known Monica as a man, and I don't know the name *he* went by then. Her older teen-aged children knew *him* as their father and also know *her* now as a woman who is still their parent. I have no doubt that for this person, these name changes represent new knowledge about herself in relationship – to herself, to other people, but also to God.

So – what does all of this say about our relationship with God? The Genesis story of Adam naming the animals is, at least in part, about humanity naming and recognizing our

relationships with the rest of Creation. Elsewhere in scripture, we recall Jesus reminding us that God is present with us where two or more are gathered – [pause and go slowly here] and thus, that when we are in relationship with one another we are *most* connected with the Holy.

The first reading we heard today, from the Psalms, reminds us of the challenge in our efforts to name and claim relationship with God. I hear this Psalm as a song to God which hints at the attempt the psalmist makes to understand and maintain relationship with the Mystery. Names are clearly not sufficient to this task, but the psalmist nevertheless tries to write about God's name, reflecting the ancient Hebrew wisdom of his day- recognizing the Sacred, the Holy, the One we call God, as more than *any* name can capture. For the psalmist, and for me, describing the defining characteristics *this* Mysterious One requires more than inadequate names - it requires dancing, singing, rejoicing, to even *begin* to name the wholeness and holiness that is God.

I read this psalm as a love song that honors God by witnessing to the wonder of the divine mystery in *everything*. The psalmist writes: “I sing and my song blesses your unsayable name... announcing the utter presence of things... evoking your glory... calling forth your miracles... You are each place and each thing, nowhere and nothing, no word and all words... *beyond* what can be seen and known- inconceivable.” To this “named namelessness.” the psalmist offers “this life/ in the beauty of the dappled world /trembling before you/ earth's utter presence...” calling on the heavens to rejoice, the earth to dance, the sea to “churn with all the life that's in it”, the fields to “burst with plenty,” the trees of the forest to “brim with dignity” in song- to the one who “comes with justice and with “the sweetness of truth.”

The psalmist invites *us* to *join in* this song- to make our *lives* songs of celebration and praise for the namelessness that is the Divine. For it is not good that we should be only alone, we

can also find company in the creatures of the air, and of the land and of the sea, and in one another. As we use our lives to name the unnamable God, it may helpful if we can remember that the names we use for God are names we, human beings, choose and have chosen- as Adam chose names for the animals created in the genesis story. *It is our nature to try to name our relationship with the Holy One. The paradox is that there is something valuable in this process, even though it is an impossible task.* The rich variety of names people of faith have used to speak of God - only hint at that whole holiness. But, the practice of using and creating new names - can serve to remind us of the complexity and beauty of *all* the forms of relationship we are invited to develop with God and with one another. ...

Amen- and thanks be to, the Author of Peace, A hiding place from the wind, A shelter, a stumbling stone, A Quickening Spirit, A diadem of Beauty, The Ancient of Days, A witness –
Thanks be... to all...of your many names... {hold up YHWH sign} Amen!

First Reading: Psalm 96 (A Zen Inspired Translation by Norman Fischer)

I sing a new song to you and the earth sings too
I sing and my song blesses your unsayable name
Day by day announcing the utter presence of things
Day by day evoking your glory among the nations
Calling forth your miracles among all the peoples -

You are each place and each thing
And nowhere and nothing
No praise and all praise
No word and all words
Touch this

For it is beyond what can be seen and known –
- inconceivable -
You of the eyeless heaven
Grandeur and majesty surround you
Who are scored and marked with light –

Everyone listen!
Recognize this light and this power
Bathe your face in the luminous circle of its named
namelessness
Place your body there, making of it a gift –

I offer you this life
In the beauty of the dappled world
Trembling before you
Earth's utter presence
Saying fearlessly aloud among the nations:
God alone gives sovereignty
And the world is unshakable
Existence is just

Let the heavens rejoice
Let the earth dance
Let the sea churn with all the life that's in it
Let the fields burst with plenty
And the trees of the forest brim with dignity
In song to you who comes with justice
Who comes with the sweetness of truth

Second Reading Genesis 2: 18-21

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that Adam should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them; and whatever he called every living creature, that was its name. Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for him there was not found a helper as his partner.