

Name Dropping
by
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Psalm 23 Acts 4:5-12
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The authors of our scripture passages are real name droppers. “You lead me in paths of righteousness for your name’s sake.” By what power or name do you heal? Peter didn’t say “I don’t need anybody to authorize me to heal,” he dropped the biggest name he knew, and trumped the high priests’ power by claiming it as the only name. Do you think people in Jesus’ time ever said, “You’ll have to forgive me, I’m not good with names?” Raise your hand if you’ve never had an embarrassing moment when you just could not remember somebody’s name. I think this universal experience gives us some insight into the spiritual nature of names. Think about it – you can’t remember a person’s name, but you fully recall who they are, their character and personality, your feelings about them. How often do we meet someone and remember what they are called, but cannot sense anything about them?

So clearly, the name of God, the name of Jesus is more than just what we happen to call that mystic-healer-carpenter-rabbi fellow. Is that Jesus with a J or with a G? It is by understanding what names really are that we can really believe that phrase “Jesus is the only name,” and get beyond the idea that salvation is only for Christians. It is by understanding the spiritual sense of names and of salvation that we actually know and live the essence of that cornerstone day to day.

Swedenborg writes that the name of God is “all things that belong to love and faith, all things that derive from God.” The name of God is “not a mere verbal expression, but is the Lord’s essential nature, and every quality from which he is worshipped.” God’s essential nature. Every quality of God. Awesome!. Swedenborg also says that when we say the name of Jesus, we manifest his presence among us. In Islam and Buddhism, reciting the many names of God is an integral part of prayer, and is believed to manifest the qualities of God on earth. We honor the memory of the dead on All Saints’ Day by saying their names aloud in this sanctuary. The best-crafted sermon ever preached from this pulpit doesn’t hold a candle to the moving emotional and spiritual power there is when we speak all of those names. If you’ve never been to that service, it’s definitely a three-Kleenex worship. By naming something, we tap into its power and participate in its essence.

The name of Jesus is bigger, truer, and more enduring than Christianity itself, more enduring and truer than human religion itself. In trying to understand these things, I often go back to the original language. Aramaic is a very mystical language, in which sounds and vibrations correspond with different qualities. The Aramaic roots of words that address God express an underlying unity in which life is forever sustained. One Aramaic scholar describes the sounds related to the name of God in very poetic terms – “that which rises and shines in space...the entire sphere of a being...the vibration by which one can recognize the Oneness...the clarity or intelligence that arises in ultimate peace.” The name, or essence of Jesus is the power of creative transformation and purposeful renewal that endures eternally by unfolding again and again in

ever-expanding possibilities. This infinite creative power is love, eternal life. Jesus the Risen Christ as the earthly incarnation of God, who “became flesh and dwelt among us for a while” expresses, but does not exhaust the essence or name of God. This name, this essence, these qualities are infinite, manifested through, but not limited to the historical Jesus.

Think for a minute about the names by which we know God, the images we have of God – shepherd, judge, host who prepares a table and anoints our head with oil, redeemer, healer, mighty fortress – these are all images of relationship. God’s qualities, God’s names, are not apart and separate from us, they define us – we are not lost and alone – God is our shepherd; we are not disconnected from how we treat others – God is a judge; none of us are left out of the great feast – God is our host; we are not bound by our circumstances – God is our redeemer and healer and fortress. The power of knowing God by name is claiming compassion and relationality (Peter and John’s healing), not gaining control (Caiaphas’ and Annas’ authority). In the many names of God, we lead each other, we call each other to compassion, we invite and welcome others to our feast, and love – not control -- is what endures.

So when Peter says he has healed in Jesus’ name, he is saying that the healing power of God’s love is available to us all in the world. Peter and John weren’t just going around preaching and arguing doctrine, they were healing, saving. The word for salvation in the Bible is translated as healing, keeping alive, preserving, rescuing, bringing to safety, delivering from danger. It has nothing to do with getting into an exclusive club. Marcus Borg describes salvation as “healing the wounds of existence.”

Peter and John aren't telling us who's going Up and who's going Down after death, they are telling us that how we choose to participate in boundless creative potential is the cornerstone of whatever we build. Our own potential may be pretty good, but it is limited; but God's potential is infinite. And when God reveals the name to Moses, "I am being itself," which really tells us "I am relationship itself," it is a covenant of responsibility to participate in God, not a covenant of privilege that excludes people outside the circle of power. It's what you do, not what you call it, that matters.

Maybe Christianity itself can be transformed by a renewed understanding of Paul's phrase, "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." It is our very lives (that would be yours and mine) that will proclaim that this does not mean "only people who join the Christian church can go to heaven." It is how we relate to each other and to all life, it is how we express our reverence for the connectedness of all life that is the name of God, that will proclaim that this message means "make the cornerstone of all you build in life compassion and unity and sustainability, for this is the only way that the wounds of existence will be healed."

Dorothee Solle, a German theologian who died last week, calls us to live out the name of God:

"I think that one danger in our lives is that we often confuse the meaning of life with success. In this way, we remain at a spiritual level which regards success as the supreme value. It is also conceivable to the believer that

the enemies of God will succeed in destroying this creation. In that case, the truth of Jesus would end in tragedy. But would it be destroyed as truth? In that case God would sit over the ruins of this radioactive planet, weeping. Faith does not mean living without anxiety. If we are serious about understanding God's being in social terms, thinking of God as the power at the beginning, the power of relationship, then the continuation of creation depends on the strength of love among human beings. Whether or not the nuclear winter comes depends on how many people rise from the death of unrelatedness and are converted. God lures anew each day."

Life in all its wholeness. The essence of the cornerstone.

The precious name of God.

Don't drop it.

Amen.