

“What’s in a Name?”

One day, an eight-year-old boy asked his mother, “Where did I come from?” The mother thought to herself, “Well, this is it.” So she sat the boy down, gathered some materials, took a deep breath, and began to explain the whole process of human reproduction and birth. And in the end it was a good presentation, complete with diagrams and charts showing the embryo in its various stages of development. Finally, when she was finished, her son looked at her and said, “Okay, but my friend Johnny comes from New Jersey, and I just wanted to know where I came from?”

I thought of that story when I realized what would be our gospel reading. Because the character who ends up being the hero, walks away with a different name than when that story began. At the beginning, his name was Simon son of Jonah; a name that tells us something about where he came from (hence the story); that is, Simon came from the household of someone named Jonah. That was his name of origin.

And then, in the midst of our gospel reading, Simon has this incredible experience of God — that God has given him this sudden insight into who Jesus really is — and it turns out to be an

experience that fundamentally changes Simon for the rest of his life.

And by the end of our gospel reading, Simon had been given a new name: Peter; *petros* in the original Greek, which means “rock.” And thereafter, in the New Testament, he would be referred to as either simply Peter, “the rock,” or as Simon Peter, “Simon the rock.”

And what I think is so cool is that, while the name Simon son of Jonah tells us where Simon came from, his new name, Simon Peter, tells us something about where he is going, or what he will become. As opposed to his name of origin, Simon Peter becomes his name of destination.

And there are other characters in the Bible who get really meaningful name changes at significant points in their lives.

For example, at the end of the 11th chapter of the Book of Genesis, we are introduced to a character named Abram, who is married to a woman named Sarai. And although both Abram and Sarai are quite old when we are introduced to them, we are told that they are childless. And yet, the name Abram means “exalted father” in the original Hebrew, which may indicate that he was a highly regarded patriarch in his community. And so that may be

his background; that is where he came from; he came from a community wherein he was held in high esteem.

But one day, God asks Abram to relocate his entire household to a distant land that is unfamiliar to Abram. It's an extreme request, to say the least; to be asked to leave the familiar for the unfamiliar; to leave the known for the quite utterly unknown. To leave a place where he is highly regarded, and move to a place where he is essentially a nobody. However, and perhaps as an enticement, God promises that an affirmative response from Abram will result in him and Sarai becoming the forebears of countless generations of descendants.

Well, and for reasons not fully explained, Abram decides to trust God's promise, and he relocates his entire household to the land of Canaan. And long story short — for his efforts, and for his trusting in God, Abram received a new name: Abraham. And that new name means “Father of a Multitude,” and it proves to be a name that eventually and accurately describes what he would become.

Now, there are other examples in the Bible of people who have these extraordinary experiences of God, and who move on from that experience with a new name. But I'll leave it to you to do the research if you really want to know more about them.

But having said all this, I think it's really unfortunate that, for the typical Christian in the United States, that we don't have that same practice of renaming people when they have had an extraordinary experience of God. We have names that were given to us at our birth, and those names to some extent describe where we came from.

Take me, for example: my last name tells you that I came from a family with the surname of Cook. And if you were a fan of Texas history, my first and middle names, which are James and Bonham — and, let me tell you that, as a child I was incessantly teased to have that middle name — but to a Texas historian those names would tell you that my family of origin was somehow connected to a man who died at the famous battle for the Alamo: a man named James Butler Bonham.

However, when I was baptized as an infant — and I do believe that baptism is an extraordinary experience of God — I was not given a new name. And my guess would be that neither were any of you.

And even though I would be willing to bet that many of us here have had other extraordinary experiences of God beyond our baptisms, I still imagine that no one walked away from *those* experiences with a new name, either.

At least, not a name that we're aware of from moment to moment, or a name that we give much thought to during the course of an average day. But, indeed, we have been given a new name, and we did each receive it at our baptism. And what is that new name? Simply this: Christian, which is from the Greek word that means "follower of Christ." Or a follower of Jesus. And as it turns out, it's a name that aptly describes what we will do, and even what we will become.

So, it's my contention that, in addition to our names of origin, we have all been given a new name of destination: Christian. But what does living into that new name look like? How can we know that we're following the right path?

To answer that question, I want to read a short passage from a book by Rob Bell, entitled *Velvet Elvis*. And this is what Bell writes:

As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.

This isn't irrational or primitive or blind faith.
It is merely being honest that we all are living
a "way".

And then, Bell cites a few examples.

I'm convinced being generous is a better way
to live.

I'm convinced forgiving people and not
carrying around bitterness is a better way to
live.

I'm convinced having compassion is a better
way to live.

I'm convinced pursuing peace in every
situation is a better way to live.

I'm convinced listening to the wisdom of
others is a better way to live.

I'm convinced being honest with people is a
better way to live.

And then, Bell concludes:

This way of thinking isn't weird or strange; it is simply acknowledging that everybody follows somebody, and I'm trying to follow Jesus.

And so, there you have it. From our gospel reading, we've been reminded that we are each in possession of a name that describes where we came from — a name of origin — but also, and by virtue of our baptism, we are also in possession of a new name that describes where we are going, what we will do, what we will become — a name of destination — Christian. And all that remains is for us to start living into that name.

Or, as Jesus described it in the Sermon on the Mount:

“...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).