

I am the bread of life

John 6:22-35

Were any of you given the power to name your pets when you were children? I never had any pets, but my husband Mike and his sister Rachel grew up on a dairy farm in Kansas and they named their farm cats – things like Chum Chum, who had a propensity for running into windows, as well as Schwartz, Henny Penny, Butterscotch, Sweetie Pie, Dairy and Cherry Coke, to name a few. Another family tradition of theirs was to name a cat after the person who gave it to them – so, when I first visited their farm after Mike and I started dating, I was honoured to meet a formidable tabby cat named Larry Ratzlaff.

I should have taken this quirkiness into consideration before Mike and I got married and started having kids. Mike wanted to call our eldest son Thor and our youngest son Wolfgang. We settled on Christof and Bastian.

Being responsible for the naming of another human being is a daunting task. Will it suit them? Will they like it? What horrible nicknames could they be given? And what if no one pronounces it correctly?

One of my favourite name stories comes from Mike's grandma – LaVina Enns – sister to TUMC's very own Nicholas Dick. When LaVina was in her late-70s, she needed a passport to go visit Mike's parents in Kansas, but she couldn't find her birth certificate. She was born in St. Catharines, Ontario, so she and her daughter Irene tried to track down a record of her birth from the hospital there, with no luck.

They finally found a copy of her birth certificate, but, since her parents only spoke German when they moved to Canada from Russia less than a year after she was born, the lines of communication with the hospital weren't clear and the birth certificate contained an incorrect spelling of her name. What should have been LaVina Dueck was spelled LaVine Duck. LaVina joked that when she dies, she wants her gravestone to read: "here lies a dead duck".

This winter, I had the privilege of facilitating a number of workshops for the Cree community of Waskaganish First Nation on James Bay. I was inspired by how many of their traditions are being revived – including the increasingly widespread fluency of the Cree language among children, adults and elders. One woman told me about the traditional way of naming babies. She said that when a baby is born, elders visit the infant and after observing it and playing with it,

someone gives the gift of a spirit name based on what they see in the baby. Sometimes an elder even suggests an everyday name in addition to a spirit name. The communal nature of this naming ritual connects newborns and elders – those closest to the “doorways of the spirit world.”¹

Names and naming have a great deal of significance in the Bible as well. There are many stories in the Old Testament which feature name changes and these name changes signify a transition for the person who is being renamed. God changes Abram (meaning “high father”) to Abraham (meaning “father of multitudes”) and Sarai (meaning “princess”) is changed to Sarah (meaning “mother of nations”). One meaning of the name Jacob is “heel catcher” because he was born directly after his twin Esau, so he came on the heels of his brother. Another meaning for Jacob is “supplanter” or “deceiver” – remember his betrayal of his twin? But after Jacob’s dramatic wrestling match with the angel, God changes Jacob’s name to Israel, meaning “struggles with God”. These name changes tell us something about the history and the destiny of those being renamed.

According to Jewish tradition, a name isn’t merely a random combination of letters given arbitrarily; a name contains something of the essence or character of the person being named. This relates to why the Israelites were so careful about the way they addressed God. God has many names in the Hebrew Bible and some Jews simply refer to God as *HaShem*, meaning “The Name” so as not to take God’s name in vain.

We often think of Yahweh as the age-old name of the God of Israel, but Yahweh is a later designation. Many biblical scholars argue that during the time of the patriarchs (i.e. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the Hebrews who became known as the Israelites, worshipped the Canaanite god El, also known as El Shaddai. El means god or lord, and El-Shaddai could mean “God of the wilderness” or “God of the mountain”. In Exodus 6:2-3, God says to Moses: “I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself to them.” This passage reflects the fact that Yahweh was unknown to the patriarchs. Rather, they worshiped the Canaanite god, El.² This is why Jacob is renamed Isra-El, “wrestles with God”.

In Canaanite religion, El was a fatherly god, a god of the sky who lived in a tent on a mountain, and had a long beard. So, lives in the sky, has a long beard, is

¹ Kim Anderson, *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine*.

² Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God*.

likened to a father... Sound familiar? El was accompanied by his wife Asherah, his warrior daughter Anat, and his son Baal. The theory goes that the Israelites, as worshippers of El and his family, were polytheistic early on. They then became monolatrous, which means they didn't deny the existence of other gods, but chose to worship one god above others. The ten commandments reflect this monolatry, particularly the second commandment, "thou shalt have no other gods before me". Later, during the Exile, the Israelites became monotheistic, denying the power of all gods other than Yahweh. Biblical scholar Mark S. Smith argues that the god of the Israelites slowly took on the characteristics of El, Asherah, Anat and Baal and then eventually became differentiated from them completely.³

Let's look more closely at the change that happens between the worship of El and the worship of Yahweh. In Exodus 3, we meet Moses tending to his father-in-law's sheep close to Mt Horeb, known as the mountain of the Lord – El's mountain. Moses sees a burning bush that continues to burn without being burnt up and a voice comes from the bush and calls him by name.

"Moses, Moses!" it says. And Moses says, "Here I am."⁵ Then the voice says, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."⁶ "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

There is some continuity between the names of God here. At first, God identifies God's self as the God of old – El Shaddai, the Lord of the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But now, God reveals to Moses a new name in the form of a sentence – Ehyeh asher Ehyeh – I am who I am. The third person of that

³ *Ibid.*

phrase is Yahweh asher Yahweh – He is who He is. So, what does this name mean? It kind of sounds like Moses asks for God’s name and God replies, “I am who I am and it’s no concern of yours”. In other words, “I am who I am – mind your own business!” We’re most familiar with the translation “I am who I am”, but a more precise translation is “I cause to be what I cause to be”. What an awesome name – “I bring into existence that which exists” or “I create that which is created”. And this sentence is shortened to Yahweh, meaning “He creates”. Therefore, God’s name reflects what God does.

Biblical scholar Christine Hayes says, “This is the Bible’s explanation for the name Yahweh, and as the personal name of God, some have argued that the name Yahweh expresses the quality of being, an active, dynamic being. This God is one who brings things into being, whether it’s a cosmos from chaos, or now a new nation from a band of runaway slaves.”⁴

God’s name change is accompanied by a change in God’s people – Moses is called to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and into a new land where they will begin a new chapter as a great nation under their own god, Yahweh.

Let’s jump ahead to the gospel of John where Jesus makes 7 “I AM” statements of his own. In this gospel, Jesus says: I am the light of the world; I am the gateway; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the true vine; and, I am the bread of life. In terms of our summer theme, which is *fullness*, we could have chosen to look at any of Jesus’ “I am” statements, but we will just look at Jesus’ one statement about himself today – *I am the bread of life*. (Maybe I’ve chosen this passage because I’m trying to cut down on gluten and the bread of life sounds pretty good right now. At least I can eat spiritual bread!)

These 7 statements by Jesus are “theophoric”, meaning they contain the name of God. Any Jews listening to Jesus’ self-revelations would have known that he was deliberately identifying himself with the God of Moses who said “I am who I am”. In other words, by saying, “I am the bread of life”, Jesus is saying, “I am God”. Furthermore, Jesus’ I AM statements accompany a set of miracles - changing water into wine, healing the official’s son, healing the paralyzed man, healing the blind man, walking on water, feeding the 5000, and raising Lazarus from the dead. These are called the “signs of Jesus” which point to Jesus’ divinity.

⁴ Christine Hayes (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_UmuEBmS5k)

So, Jesus doesn't just declare himself divine in a series of I AM statements, he *does* divine things. He causes to be what he causes to be, in a true Yahweh fashion.

The well-known beginning of the gospel of John reads: "In the beginning was the Word." In *Faust*, Goethe writes "In the beginning was the Deed." Fitting, since Word and Deed, for Jesus, are synonymous. When Jesus says "I am the bread of life", he has just fed 5000 people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. By the way, this is the only miracle that appears in all four gospels. After Jesus has fed the crowd, he says "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus both provides the food and is the feast. And through the giving of his own self, he feeds the hungry belly and the hungry spirit.

In conclusion, I'd like to say that I believe in the materiality of these miracles – that Jesus actually fed the hungry in a real, physical sense the way Yahweh provided manna and quail to his starving people in the desert. I like to think that Jesus actually turned water into wine, gave mobility to the paralyzed, vision to the blind and life to the dead. But there is another way of looking at these miracles and at the love Jesus shows to every one of us. Some of us have enough to eat but are never satisfied; some of us feel paralyzed and can't find our footing in life; some of us feel lifeless and hopeless and fail to see the possibility of resurrection. Jesus, the bread of life, can turn what looks like scarcity into fullness through his divine generosity and love. Jesus can make a few loaves and fish feel like a feast; can make water taste like wine; can turn blindness into understanding and clarity; and can resurrect a broken spirit. In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." Thanks be to God, the great I AM who gives us life and gives it abundantly.

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