

## SPG#83, Holy Name

January 1, 2006 – Fr. Charles Pope

Exodus 34:1-8

Romans 1:1-7

Luke 2:15-21

What's in a name?

We really could spend quite a bit of time answering that question. The Bible is shot through with the activity of naming in many instances. First there was the creating and naming of Adam and Eve. There was Adam giving a name to all the animals. In the spiritual journey of the patriarch Abram, God changed his name to Abraham. In the spiritual journey of the patriarch Jacob his name was changed to Israel. The name of Saul was changed to Paul in the New Testament. Many times in the Old Testament, after a significant event occurred in a location, that place was given a name in recognition of the experience and the place. In the discussion of physical modifications at St. Paul's, as we name and re-name the space of the past, present, and future, we will eventually give the space a name that will give birth to change.

The naming of God is a complete subject within itself.

In Exodus 6 **God spoke to Moses saying, 'I am YHVH.** (YHVH is the English rendering of four Hebrew letters to indicate a name of God. These Hebrew letters have no vowel markings. In a technical sense they cannot be spoken since they are more like breath sounds. In Judaism the High Priest could approximate the sound and could utter this name while alone in the Holy of Holies in the Temple once per year. When the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD that pronunciation was lost.

A popular approximation that has come down to us is Yahweh) Exodus continues, **I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as EL Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them as YHVH.**

The word Shaddai is one of the words used as a name of God. It translates out as "breast," and brings to mind images of mountains and breasts. Rabbi Karyn Kedar in her essay on "The Many Names of God" asks the question, "Dare we say in English what our ancestors understood in their native Hebrew? El Shaddai – the God of breasts."

In the Exodus passage I just read Shaddai is juxtaposed with YHVH. YHVH comes from the Hebrew word "to be." YHVH refers to the God who cannot be described in a name., the God of eternity. We can attribute names to God. But eventually they all fall short.

In the Old Testament God is also known as Adonai. God is known as Elohim.

Rabbi Kedar suggests that we give ourselves to the dynamic of naming that is so prevalent throughout scripture. We may call God a "King," or a Father," or a "Mother."

We may call God a friend or a lover. This naming may go on in our services here at St. Paul's, and in all houses of faith. It may also go in the privacy of one's own heart.

But in all the naming we will not capture God in words. And if we could, would God be God? And in the truest understanding of naming in the scripture I think we will find that it is not really meant as an airtight description. Rather to name someone is to honor them and to love them.

As I look out over this church, I remember the day and the days when I was able to say your name from memory. And even now I enjoy saying your names in different settings.

And I see it as an activity of enjoyment, of love, and honor.

And rather than enjoy the thought of a being who loves and serves I can simply think of your name. In the same vein I think there was joy when Adam was given a name. And I think there is joy when we name God and when we name each other. The joy is not in the capturing, defining, or confining of an essence. The joy and the love is in the naming.

There is joy and love when the Psalmist exclaims, “O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.”

And beyond the naming, after we have given a name, there is joy and love remembering as we say the name again.

I think one of the true joys of priesthood is in getting to know people in a parish. And so in moving in homes, in meetings, at worship, and in the larger community I can not only know about you. I can know you. All of us can know each other. In the same way, as we name the eternal YHVH in our lives, we can not only know about God. We can know God.

I end today with a prayer for the new year. Let us pray.

**O Lord, if I could name all the names of the people in this church at the same time, it would be a wonderful and beautiful name.**

**And because I am not able to do that, I lift before you the faithful of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Grinnell. And I pray that in this year, 2006, as we name each other and name you in our lives, that our ability to enjoy, to celebrate, to create would increase as we love and serve. May our lives be blessed. And may your Holy Name be praised. Amen.**