

CUMC Sermon August 30, 2020  
Pastor Nancy Victorin-Vangerud  
*Say His Name! (What's in a Name: Part II)*  
Exodus 3:1-15

Prayer: Gracious God, as we reflect on the scripture, may it be like we are standing on holy ground. Amen.

Intro:

Sometimes when playing icebreakers, we get the question “So what are your favorite books?” When I get that question, I always say the novel *Beloved*, written by the Nobel prize-winning author, Toni Morrison. *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, who as a pregnant woman escapes slavery from the Sweet Home plantation, and makes her way north to her freed mother-in-law’s home, in Cincinnati. Her mother-in-law, named Baby Suggs, was also from Sweet Home, where she was known as a healer. Late at night Baby Suggs would “steal away” to the “hush arbor,” a clearing amongst the trees. Protected by the dark, Baby Suggs first called the children, then the women, and then the men into her circle of tears and blessing. She would remind them that here, in the clearing, their bodies were loved--their hands, their legs, their backs--their whole bodies. With Baby Suggs, they could reclaim their humanity, their dignity, hearing her

call their true names. Her heart was so big, everyone could find a place to heal, so she received a new name: “Baby Suggs, holy”.

1. Hmmmm. Amazing. So what's in a name? What's IN a name? Is a name just like a label, functioning to distinguish one person from another? Are names arbitrary, like “Oh, any ol' name will do”. Is a name like a brand, as in “Well this name is trending now”? Or is there something more in a name? What's in a name?

Last week Pastor Riva raised the question for us. Remember, she preached about the connection between names and identities. She shared with us how her name, Riva Ruth, connects her deeply to her family history, her culture and faith. In the livestream worship chat-box, Naomi Jones shared that her name, Naomi, is a biblical name, meaning “sweet”, or “my sweetness”. She told us how her father would say her name with special endearment. Then, Kristine Rodriguez shared in the chat how both her children's names have meaning. Kristine's and Ivan's son's name, Ian, means “gift of God”. Their new daughter's name, Iliana, means “God has answered my prayer.” Yes. We can hear how precious these names are to each individual. Names connect us in relations of sacred meaning and

belovedness--with God, with our ancestors, with purpose and blessing.

What's in a name? Holiness. Holiness is in a name.

2.

Well, Ok. We got it. Maybe now it's time to look at our Hebrew Bible reading. This morning, let's turn to scripture. Today, we're in the book of Exodus. Now, Exodus tells the story of God delivering and liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The story is one of the founding stories for Jews, Christians and Muslims. In English, the name of the book -- "Exodus" -- brings into focus the departure or going-out from Egypt. But in the Jewish tradition, this biblical book is called "The Book of Names," or "*shemote*," because the first line of the text starts out, "These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher." These are the founding names. Jacob's youngest child--Joseph, the dream interpreter-- was already in Egypt. But after this generation died, and after the new Pharaoh forgot the names of Jacob and his family, the Hebrew people found themselves enslaved, making mud and straw bricks for Pharaoh's grand

building projects. Eventually, in the Book of Names, we meet up with Moses, whose name means “he who was drawn from the water.” But in today’s text, Chap. 3, Moses is no little baby. He’s a grown man, who left the court of Pharaoh, fleeing into the wilderness of Midian, after he killed an Egyptian soldier who treated a Hebrew slave cruelly. In the wild land of Midian, Moses helped the daughters of the local priest draw water for their flocks (hear the play on words--he who was drawn from the water, was now drawing water). The priest of Midian, Reuel, whose name means “friend of God”, was happy to have big, strong, Moses stay around. So Moses married Reuel’s daughter Zipperah, whose name meant “bird”. Moses took up his new agrarian life, shepherding, chilling, putting on pause his soul-searching questions. Who was he? What’s in his name?

3. Well, but then, but then... Let’s not go too fast. You know what happened at this point of the story. You can picture it in your mind. Woosh! The burning bush! God showed up, and God disrupted everything! No still small voice, no calm gentle breeze, no comforting affirmation. In this old, old story, really more like an epic, when God showed up there was a blazing fire in the middle of the desert. Wasn’t it

hot enough? Why would God disrupt Moses' life in such a drastic way? And the message--way out of Moses' comfort zone--this God of his ancestors wanted to send him back to Pharaoh? Something about bringing the Israelites out of Egypt? Moses needed to check this out. He needed some form of verification, like a God-ID. Moses asked the voice, "So what name should I use when I go back to your people, and say 'Your God has sent me'?" You might wonder, now, wouldn't Moses have already known the name of his ancestors' deity? Or perhaps because he grew up in the court of Pharaoh, Moses was acquainted with many gods, so he might have truly wondered. Well, which God? Was this a trap? Rightfully so, Moses wanted some surety, some certainty about this impossible mission.

But then, in response, Moses heard the most disturbing thing of all. It didn't make any sense at all, at first. The Holy One, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob told Moses, he should tell the people that the divine name is "*eh-hee-yeh---ah-shar--eh-hee-yeh*". When the Hebrew is translated into English, the 'name' typically reads as "I AM WHO I AM". Sounds pretty definitive, as in "I am who I AM, not who you say I am". God chooses to be who God chooses to be. Remember this is a God burning in an inexhaustible bush, not a God in some little box.

But the Hebrew words also convey a future tense, so the translation into English, really should “I will be who I will be”, or perhaps, “I will become who I will become.” The reality of God is not set in stone, in the past. God’s reality is already in front of us, unbound, emerging, on the horizon, in the future, not defined by our previous and prescriptive definitions. Sure, there are a lot of descriptions for God in the Bible--God of compassion, most merciful God, almighty God. But these words are ‘about’ God. God’s very name is inscrutable, a mystery beyond all understanding. To Moses, this divine response is so discomfoting, as this “I will be who I will be” means that there is no one, single name. There is no one single name or image that can convey God.

4. So where does the Book of Names leave us this morning? A book of names about a God without one name? How does the scripture story impact us today, here, now? What difference can this ancient wisdom make in our lives? I would like to suggest that remembering the discomfoting, un-nameability of the Divine can invite us to pray in a new way. But in order to explore this new way of praying, we need to start with protest.

In recent months, in cities all around the world, people are coming together to protest police violence, racism and poverty. When George Floyd was killed in police custody, one of the protests was organized by the Twin Cities African American clergy, led by Presiding Elder Stacey Smith of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. As a diverse gathering of clergy, we walked in silence for a mile down University Ave, and then turned into the Target parking lot, making a large circle. As Rev. Smith began the program, she started out like many protests have been doing, “Say His Name!”. And the gathering responded “George Floyd!”, and then she said again, “Say His Name!”, and the litany began. Name after name after name was shared. “Ahmaud Aubery.” “Elijah McClain.” “Michael Brown.” The protest refrain has become so familiar. Now it has expanded. “Say her name!” “Breonna Taylor!” “Sandra Bland!” “Brayla Stone!” This weekend after Kenosha, we might say “Say their names!” “Jacob Blake.” “Jojo Rosenbaum.” “Anthony Huber.” The call and response cries out for us to remember, to not forget each distinctive person with their own story! Naming each precious name affirms the humanity of each person, created in the image of God. See we may not be able to say the name of God, but we can say the name of every person created in the image of God.

Speaking theologically, it is the utter freedom and inscrutability of the Divine that grounds the inclusive nameability of each person in the image of God

So say their names, even in our private prayers. Let this remembrance of those persons harmed or killed disrupt our prayer lives. We can't go back to normal. Normal wasn't normal anyway. We need to get ready to be met by God in the future. Prayer opens our hearts to do so.

Steve Belton, president and CEO of Urban League Twin Cities, and Minister of Preaching at Park Avenue UMC in Minneapolis, says “**systemic change begins with personal interruption.**” Simply put, it means doing things a different way than we always have done it.

So in closing:

Maybe you've been praying the same way for many years.

Maybe you have never prayed, but are curious to learn.

Maybe you've stopped praying because it doesn't seem to matter.

Maybe you've given up because you wonder what to say, and who to

say it to.

This morning, how about starting a new prayer practice...*Say their names.* In fact, keep a list. Add to it over time. Not just people you know, but people you don't know. People whose precious names disrupt your life. Remember each holy one, for a future where the dignity of every person created in the image of God is honored.

May the God of the burning bush find you, and ignite a flame of love in your heart.

## DISRUPTION

Steve Belton, president and CEO of Urban League Twin Cities, and Minister of Preaching at Park Avenue UMC in Minneapolis, says **systemic change begins with personal interruption**. Simply put, it means doing things a different way than we always have done it. He suggests some essential steps and minimal requirements to start our transformation, acknowledging they “promise to disrupt our routines, waive our privileges and dislodge our comfort.” In a recent *Star Tribune* article, he specifically addresses white people as a Black man, but I think it includes all persons of color.

1. Select a Black neighborhood as your primary destination for personal commerce, including groceries, pharmacies, personal grooming, hardware, etc. Forgo your favorite mall, internet peddler, and local eatery.
2. Attend worship at an African American church and give your tithes and offerings there.
3. Join the board of a Black-led and missioned nonprofit organization that aligns with your skills and interests and get involved.
4. Give your money to Black-led and missioned organizations.

“Town Hall: Seasoned leaders discuss Dismantling Racism” facilitated by Erin Hawkins

What happened in El Paso massacre, in MPLS

The church can no longer evade the contradictions--love/violence

Church can embrace at a core commitment

Love, serve and sacrifice for all,

Include all the languages, all the gifts,

Everyone now engaged in the movement--towns and cities across the US

People hearts set on fire, when witness to George Floyd's death

Country ignited now around, the right time, as a denomination

Enough is enough, we need to change who we are, our UMC structure

Economic inequality, maternal health, infant mortality

Relearn what we have been taught--not knowing the whole story, so much left out, so much based on one perspective

How to acknowledge white privilege?

How do we raise voice in places where there is resistance?

Pressing onto Freedom (UM Bishops)

Christianity as a whole, has to reexamine the forms of Christianity taught and practiced...part of a world system, world expansion colonialist periods...Christianity presented as an instrument of empire, rather than of Jesus. We need to dismantle in our structures of **“plantation capitalism”** **Plantation Capitalism is where the business owner thinks chiefly of his workers as a commodity, an object, an expense to be minimized. T**

The Bible went in the name of the King or Queen. Spiritual poisons have infiltrated the church over the years. Christianity itself needs a conversation and sanctification process... antiracism, antisexism, antiviolence, soulforce perspective, anti plantation capitalism. Most of the economies of the world...slavery, take the land, poor wages, poor benefits, refused to have a quality education system.

How does a pastor or lay person do/lead this conversion process? First steps? Church service as holistic about Jesus, wrestle with lectionary, holistic preaching of the scriptures, not “Are you saved”, but what kind of lives ought we be living? How to live by the power God has given us as living persons? WE don’t go far enough...not despising or hating others, loving others is not just people like us, all the people of the earth as our neighbor. Stop compromising the meaning of Jesus! Babies born into poverty are not responsible for the poverty. ONGOING Conversation (that’s sanctification) Not just “Do you believe in Jesus as lord and savior” but living as disciples of Jesus.

Pastor present in the community struggles, engaged in presence/service in community. Willing to go off the map, off the terrain we are comfortable with. Public square .... Not just the ‘chapel’. Pastor to the church, but also then the community we are appointed to.

Waking up white, Deborah Irving

This is not about being an ally, this is our (white) work.

Sue Thrasher on what whites are to be doing

We can be on the side of the future, or on the side of the past.

We can choose

Every morning, you have to consciously think...how to be engaged, keep finding the answers.

Making the road by walking--Paulo Friere, and Miles Horton

1940 UMW white women speaking against lynching

Can the UMC become anti-racist? Lawson says, can the UMC become full of the love of God and neighbor--yes.

Rev. James Lawson, UM pastor for over

“They have organized around the grief and offered a ministry to the families of the Black men and women who have been shot and killed by police. They have helped those families to grieve, helped them to be empowered — to not let the murder, the execution of their child, go quietly away.”

He calls it a modern religious movement.

“Now Trayvon Martin’s father and mother are involved with George Floyd’s family. They have surrounded almost every family with a ministry of healing.”

The movement is giving a voice and addressing the pain of the families, helping them to turn over their grief to God and to stand up as a family, Lawson said.

The movement and families are saying, “This is not God’s will. To me that is astounding and it is happening in our society today,” he added.

“In public life you have a movement that is trying to be a minister to the families and therefore to the nation. Look at that network, they are helping them to heal all over the country.”

Calling this movement a protest is focusing on the wrong word, he said. The media doesn't see it, they don't study the people.

"Protest is such a bad term because all those marches and walks are calling the U.S. to a new way of life.

"The movement is calling for the dismantling of the old forms of racist violence that we have taken for granted and replacing them with new forms of kinship that will allow us to be a far stronger nation and better people. Repent of the sin and take on new life, that is a Christian and religious mantra.

"Break down sin, repent and discover new life in the process. The great story that is lasting and eternal. We churches need to see that story."

Lynn Unger

*Pandemic*

What if you thought of it  
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—  
the most sacred of times?

Cease from travel.

Cease from buying and selling.

Give up, just for now,  
on trying to make the world  
different than it is.

Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
to whom you commit your life.

Center down.

And when your body has become still,

reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives  
are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils  
of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love—  
for better or for worse,  
in sickness and in health,  
so long as we all shall live.

Lynn Ungar serves as a minister for the Church of the Larger Fellowship, an online congregation for Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals. Her first book of poetry is entitled, *Blessing the Bread*. Unger lives in San Francisco, CA.

*Debie Thomas: [debie.thomas1@gmail.com](mailto:debie.thomas1@gmail.com)*