

*Courage That Comes With a Name*

Mark 1:9-12

A seminary professor named Heather Murray Elkins tells a story about a time she led a retreat for her students. The texts for the retreat were the stories of important characters in the Bible-- Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David--all those people whose stories we read to tell us something about who God is. At the end of the retreat, she asked each of the participants to say which of those characters, those faithful people, they most identified with; who they thought of as having the kind of faith, or personality, or story that was most like theirs. She was asking her students, essentially, rename themselves--to give themselves the name of a biblical character, so that as they left the retreat, they could carry that name with them. It would remind them of that character's experience, and of his or her own calling to faith.

For the closing exercise of the retreat, they all sat in a circle, and one at a time, each student came to a chair in the middle and spoke out loud the name they had chosen, and said a few sentences about why; what they appreciated about that character's story, and why they identified with him or her.

Finally, everyone had taken their turn except for one young man. Dr. Elkins turned to him to encourage him to participate. "Do you have a name you want to take for yourself?" she asked him. He got up slowly, and walked into the center of the circle and finally sat down. "I thought about it a lot," he said, "but I couldn't think of a name that was stronger than the name I've had my whole life."

"What is that name?" she asked him gently.

He answered slowly, painfully. "Not good enough," he said. "All my life, my name has been 'not good enough'. There is no other name that fits me as well."

"That is not your name!" they wanted to say, but they didn't, because they had learned somewhere that sometimes it is most important just to listen. And so every person in that room sat silently for a few moments. And then, one by one, without saying a word, all of them in the circle went to this young man in the center. They put their hands on his shoulder. And then someone said out loud the words that Jesus heard at his baptism: "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased." And if we put that in words that might go easier into our ears, we might hear God say, "You are the child of my heart. You make me very happy."

Those were the words this young man needed to hear.

Those are the words we all need to hear.

Those were the words that changed Jesus' life, the words he no doubt kept coming back to later, every time he was tempted to forget who he was.

Remember that Jesus was baptized before he began doing any of the work we know him for. The way Mark tells the story, Jesus' baptism happens in Chapter 1, suggesting that maybe Jesus' life was unremarkable until he heard those words. No wise men, no angels singing about his birth; just this moment when he stepped into a river and let his cousin John pour water over his head. And then a sudden realization—an *epiphany*—about who he was and what he was called to do.

Luke's Gospel begins with all those stories we tell at Christmas: shepherds, stars, a manger. This story, of Jesus' baptism, appears a little later, but still there is this moment, this giving of a new name—"beloved child of God"—that happens before Jesus steps forward to preach his first sermon.

In fact, all four Gospels—every version of the story of Jesus' life that the early church thought was important to pass down—a include the story of Jesus' baptism. As though it is critical to understanding who he is.

And then, they tell us, Jesus went off into the desert by himself. For forty days he was alone. We might think of that time as a vision quest, the kind of experience that Joseph Campbell talks about as part of every hero's journey. Or a rite of passage that many cultures require of their young people as they become adults. Maybe the reference to forty days is meant to remind us of the forty years that Jesus' ancestors, the Israelites, walked in the wilderness while they were led by Moses, making a road to the promised land. Whatever the back story is, whether we understand Jesus' path as universal or specific to his tradition, this too—this time of being alone, face-to-face with his own demons—seems to be critical to the writers who wanted us to know who Jesus was.

While he was out there, Mark says, he was tempted by Satan. This too is part of every hero's—maybe every *person's*—journey. But here's what I know about being tempted: It never *feels* like it's Satan who's tempting me. If someone was wearing a nametag that said "Hello. I'm the Devil", it wouldn't be all that tempting to do what she said. It would be easy to walk away. What tempts me is much more subtle than that. Temptation comes in a voice I'm more likely to trust—like maybe my own. My tempter's voice sounds a lot like self-doubt, or sometimes anger or fear. Sometimes my pride, saying, "You can do better." Or "that shouldn't have happened to you." Sometimes it sounds like me wondering, "Why shouldn't you have everything you want? Who said it was wrong, anyway?" I'm only likely to call these thoughts "temptations" after I've resisted them. Until then, they've snuck into my head wearing clothes that make them look like good reason.

Out there by himself, hungry and alone, it didn't take long before the misgivings started to settle in for Jesus. Every one of them was designed to make him doubt what he'd heard at his baptism; every question began with the words, "If you really are the son of God..." Prove it, that voice challenged. If you're so sure you're related to God, act like a god. Exercise your power; make something happen! Turn rocks into bread; why should you be hungry? Throw yourself off the cliff and see what happens; you're invincible, right?

You know how this part of the story ends. Jesus refused to let that voice of temptation take him over. He held on to the name he'd received—beloved child; he didn't have to prove anything. He remembered that he'd heard a call to pour himself out for others, not to bolster his own ego. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been so strong, or so grounded. No doubt Jesus had to sift through many voices in his head, just like we do. But he kept going back to the one voice that gave him the identity that was most true, the identity that called the best out of him.

*Beloved child. Child of my own heart.* This name wasn't a badge that he won by deserving it. He got the name first. That's what happens for us at baptism too. Whether we're baptized as infants or youth or adults, baptism is a naming ritual--a moment when we take on a new identity. At baptism we receive two names: the individual name we've been given by our parents, the name that distinguishes us from every other person. And another name: "Christian". *Christ-one*. Follower of Jesus the Christ. Often we get that name--*Christian*--before we even begin to know what it *means* to be a Christian, before we know where following Jesus might take us, or what it will ask of us.

The way Luke tells the story, Jesus went back to his hometown shortly after he finished his wilderness trip. His synagogue family welcomed their promising young adult home from college, and invited him to speak. He read a section from the Bible that most of the people were already familiar with, verses from Isaiah that began with the words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." God has named me—to bring good news to the poor, release to people who are bound up, freedom to the people who have gotten caught in an unfair system. The people in the synagogue weren't surprised to hear those words; they'd heard them a million times before as part of the good, comforting, far-off picture of God they'd gotten used to. But then Jesus preached his sermon. He didn't spend time digging into the background of the scriptures; he didn't ask, "What do you think this means?" or "Isn't this interesting?" His sermon was one sentence. One clear, unambiguous sentence: "Today is the day; now is the time; this is what I came to do."

Think about how much courage it takes to be that clear.

It took a lot of courage to be Jesus.

Think about how dangerous it was, and how much courage it took, for Jesus to challenge a group of self-righteous people who stood in front of him with rocks in their hands, when they brought to him a woman they'd caught in the act of adultery.

How filled with trust he had to be when he told thousands of people to sit down and get ready to eat, when all he had in front of him was five little loaves of bread and two fish. It took a lot of courage to be Jesus.

Not too long after he began his ministry, Jesus invited a few people to follow him, to watch him close-up so they could learn to do what he did. "Disciples," we call them. "*Now you go be Jesus*" was the last thing he said to them.

That took a lot of courage too.

Taking on the name *Christian*—follower of Jesus--set those disciples apart in some way--even from lots of other good people, people they knew and loved, people whom they admired. The same is true for us. Following Jesus meant then—as it does today--entering a long and courage-demanding process of transformation. It involves learning a new way of life, living by a different set of values from most of the world. Disciples have to be willing to leave behind the comfort of fading into the background when courage and conviction are what is needed. You have to trust you are standing on solid ground before you can imagine doing this. You have to have heard, and keep hearing, a voice reliable enough to drown out the other voices, the ones that say, “What makes you so sure?” or “Who do you think you are?”

“You are the child of my heart. You make me very happy.”

“Now *you* go be Jesus.”

This is the voice that speaks your name.

This is the name you have been given.

Can you hear it?