

Epiphany 2 Year A

January 19, 2014

Behind every name, there's a story. Most everyone here this morning knows that my name is Bob. And most of you can probably surmise that Bob is not actually my given name – the name that appears on my birth certificate, but rather it's a nickname. But not only is my first name not “Bob,” it's not “Robert” either. In fact, my first name has nothing at all to do with the name “Bob” or any derivation thereof. My first name is John. It's my middle name that is Robert. So, you might be asking yourself, “Why is it that he goes by his middle name instead of his first name?” Well, the answer to that is really rather simple. My name is John Robert Honeychurch and I go by Bob (or Bobby to my family), because I was named after my uncle whose name was John Robert Honeychurch, and he went by Bob (or Bobby to his family).

And why did my dad's brother go by Bob rather than John? Well, to be honest with you, I don't have the faintest idea. You see, my Uncle Bob died 8 years before I was born. He was a pilot flying with the Montana Air National Guard, and was killed in a plane wreck in 1949. He was my father's only brother... my grandparents' only child other than my dad. And so, when I came along – the first son born to the only son left living – I was named after the one who had died. And in many ways, I suppose, I came along to take his place.

Names are funny. Not only do they say something about the person who gets the name, but they say even more about the ones who do the naming. Like I said, behind every name, there's a story. So... that's my name, and that's my

story. What about yours? How did your name come to be? And what does your name say, not so much about you, but about the people who gave you that name in the first place? I would hope that might be something you could talk about with one another during coffee hour after the service this morning.

In today's gospel lesson – which begins a scant 29 verses into the first chapter of John's account – we witness the first appearance of Jesus in that gospel. In that brief 13-verse reading we heard this morning, Jesus is given not one, not two, not even three, but four different names. First, John the Baptist calls him “the Lamb of God” – and not just any old Lamb of God at that, but the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And then, a few verses later, John ups the ante, and proclaims of Jesus, “...this is the Son of God.”

The next day, John points Jesus out to two of John's own disciples, who begin following Jesus. When Jesus notices them, they call out a third name, “Rabbi (which means ‘teacher’).” And then lastly we find that one of those two followers goes home and tells his brother of this new discovery with the news, “We have found the Messiah.”

“Lamb of God,” “Son of God,” “Rabbi,” “Messiah,” ... all of them are pretty heady titles, pretty impressive names. And all of them say something about who Jesus was, and what Jesus did. But like my name... and your names... the names which others assign to Jesus say as much about the people who give the names as they say about the one who received them. They don't just describe reality. For those who offer those titles to Jesus, they name the world as it might be, the world as we want it will be, the world as we hope it might become. “Lamb of God,” “Son of God,” “Rabbi,” “Messiah.”

Perhaps the most provocative line in this morning's gospel lesson is the one brief sentence assigned to Jesus. You don't see them much any more, but perhaps you remember – or perhaps you still own – what is called a “red letter edition” of the Bible. First published in 1899, “red letter editions” show all of the words spoken by Jesus in red letters rather than black text, so that they'll stand out more boldly. Well, if you were reading this morning's gospel in your “red letter edition”, this is the first time that red ink graces the pages of John's gospel, and the first words out of Jesus' mouth are words which continue to burn into the hearts and minds of each of us. When he realizes that two of John's disciples are following along behind him, Jesus turns to them and asks, “What are you looking for?” – not “Who are you looking for?” or “What do you want”, or “Are you looking for something?”, as though the answer might be “Yes” or “No” ... but a simple, strong, and direct question which demands an answer: “What are you looking for?”

That's the question, I guess, that each of us has to answer for ourselves as well this morning. What are you looking for? Right here, right now, what is it that you are looking for? I realize that there are a lot of other places each one of us could choose to be on a Sunday morning in the middle of what is a three-day weekend for many of us, and with the start of today's NFL football playoff games just a few hours away this afternoon. And yet, for whatever reason, it is right here at All Saints that we find ourselves this morning. And why? I guess I think it's because, deep down inside, each one of us is searching for our own answer to Jesus' question.

What are you looking for? What is it that has brought you to All Saints this morning? Maybe you're lonely, and you're looking for friendly faces. Maybe you're confused, and you're looking for some answers to life's difficult questions. Maybe you're frazzled and at the end of your rope, and you're looking for a little peace and quiet. Maybe you find yourself going in a million different directions, and you're looking for something to call the center of your life. Or maybe you just know that you're looking for something, and you're not even sure what it is. There are as many answers to Jesus' question this morning as there are people who have gathered here together... each of us seeking, searching, yearning for a way forward.

And I can only say that, whatever your specific response to that question, you've come to the right place... not because you're necessarily going to leave here this morning with a neatly packaged answer, but rather because, at least here – if at no place else in your life – you'll know that you are surrounded by other people who are trying to answer the same question in their lives.

Some of you know that I spent a few hours one evening this past week sitting in the waiting area outside the emergency room of Cottage Hospital – thankfully as a visitor rather than as a patient. A short time just observing the world go by in that particular environment is an amazing sociological exercise. Perhaps more than any other location which I can think of, the emergency room is one of the most egalitarian settings there is around here, with people from all walks of life who must pass through the same set of doors to receive care for a variety of illnesses and injuries. In just a brief time, I was able to witness a cross-section of the Santa Barbara community you just won't find anywhere else. From a well-to-do older woman who was worried to death because her husband was disoriented

and had just been transported to the hospital by ambulance; to the nine-member Latino family who all trooped in together because one of the kids was running a fever; to the homeless man wrapped in dirty blankets who was coughing up a storm at the far end of the room; to the twenty-something college kid with his basketball buddy who was there because he had twisted his ankle. The cast of characters was seemingly endless.

But I thought to myself as I looked around at the sea of faces, that – while each of them had their own unique response – the question being asked of them all was the same, “What are you looking for?” For one person it might be medicine to stop their child’s fever. For another it might just be a hand to hold while they sit there filled with fear. For a third, it could be a steady, reassuring voice telling them that things were going to be okay. For yet another, it might be the hope that they wouldn’t be spending another night out on the street.

The characters in this morning’s gospel lesson... the characters who filled the emergency room last Wednesday evening... the characters who fill this sanctuary this morning... different responses, but always the same question. When Jesus saw two men following him, he turned and said to them, “What are you looking for?” And they said to him, “Rabbi.”

Just as there’s probably a story behind your name... just as there was a story behind all those names given to Jesus in this morning’s gospel lesson... there is also a story behind the name you give to God as well... a story which says as much about your answer to the question, “What are you looking for?” as it does about God. Which of these phrases rings most true for you right now: “What a friend we have in Jesus,” “Rock of ages, cleft for me,” “Jesus, lover of my soul,” “Our

Father who art in heaven,” “The good shepherd,” “The way, the truth, and the life,” “The light of the world,” “The hope of the nations,” “Lamb of God,” “Son of God,” “Rabbi,” “Messiah”... the list goes on and on and on.

And each one of them not only describes God, but also it names what we’re looking for, what we most need in God right now. It is that God of countless names who comes to us today with the simple question: “What are you looking for?” May you find your own answer to that question, that you might come face-to-face with the one who gives words to the wordless, names to the nameless, and new life to those who seek.

AMEN.