

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany. On the Gospel: John 1: 29-42. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

It's rare than anyone tries to abbreviate my first name – "Nigel" doesn't lend itself to shortening, nor altering – Robert to Rob or Bob, Albert to Al, Francis to Frank or Fran. One person I worked with in 1971 decided "Ni" would be okay with him (he didn't consult me); another tried out "Nige", but that didn't seem to work either.

Nor, sometimes, does it work to shorten Albert to Al – I've known 4 "Albert"s, and two of them have been "Al", two "Albert".

Then there's another category of names – "Nicknames". I recall two – applied to others, not me! – from highschool. One was "Herc" – short for "Hercules". The other was "Shorty". They were applied, respectively, to the smallest and tallest kids in my class!

And, of course, my favorite – applied to a parishioner in Bedford, IN who spent hundreds of dollars for a piece of commercial equipment to be used at the Shrove Tuesday supper. All it did was measure a set amount of batter for the pancakes! He was, thereafter, called.... "Pancake"

What's interesting in all of this is that while we might introduce ourselves with a particular rendition of our own name, we almost never get to choose exactly what people will call us when they get to know us!

And it's also true that bestowing a new name on someone does something to them – there's a new identity that comes with the name.

Today we hear a wonderful story about new names and new identities. One of them is given to Simon brother of Andrew: "Cephas" – in Greek that would be "Petros" which is where we get "Peter" from.

Anyone know what "Cephas" meant? It was the word for "rock"; henceforth Jesus nickname for Simon: "Rocky". We don't know why Jesus chose that nickname – though clearly it was done with affection AND humor.

That Jesus would do this is a clear indication that he knew Simon well already – this wasn't a chance encounter, in other words. Otherwise Jesus wouldn't have known enough about Simon to re-name him "Rocky"

Which brings us to John the Baptist (or "Jack the Dipper" as one biblical scholar likes to call him!). Seeing Jesus come toward him John gives him a name that must also have come from some experience of him: "Lamb of God". That's not a traditional name, is it?!! But it makes sense; the author of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel was largely uninterested with recounting history but highly focused on bringing out the deeper meaning contained in the story of Jesus. Everything in that gospel 'means' something. Behind it all is a startling claim: that the institutional access to God that the Temple system represented is replaced in Jesus.

Down the generations since John's Gospel was written Christians have taken that identifying name to refer to the Passover Lamb, and to see a parallel between Jesus' death and resurrection and the Passover – so much so, in fact that the name for the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection in every language but English is “Pascha” – a New Passover.

We're so used to hearing that name – “Lamb of God” – that we rather take it for granted. Yet clearly for the author of the Gospel of John this was something new and very significant. And it's a claim with significant repercussions. New names mean new identities.

Finding those new identities is based on the invitation at the end of this passage: to “come and see” (verse 39). Ultimately, these words represent an invitation to a way of living informed by the long traditions of our Judeo-Christian faith.

Today's first reading from Isaiah makes that clear. We, as the direct descendants of his audience, are also chosen recipients of the Divine Message – and that requires something of us. We can't just listen; we're called on to respond....respond to the call to follow AND to work to bring about that different, counter-cultural, peaceable kingdom that the Lamb of God proclaims. We, as God's people partners in that proclamation. This vision of Isaiah is particularly fitting as we stand on the threshold of the celebration of the life of Martin Luther King Jr., who echoed all of the great Old Testament prophets' common message, that if we are really committed to God then we will not just “let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5: 24), we will, as well, work to make it so now, as far as it is within our ability to do so.

The Gospel of John is reiterating Jesus' invitation – “come and see” and directing it at us! We're being called to claim this new name and new identity to its fullest, even if we don't feel particularly prepared or comfortable.

There will be times when we are called to be a “lamb of God” for others. That, surely, is some of the truth in the story of people like Martin Luther King Jr., but it's our truth also. There will be times when, by our actions, or words, or simple presence we help others demolish the walls that separate them from the fullness of life that God has promised us – the walls that, ultimately, separate us from God.

And there are times when we are called to accept that others will be a “lamb of God” for us, will help break down our walls of separation, help us overcome those walls that separate us from others and from God.

New names mean new identities. This Epiphany season we're being invited to explore those new identities, that we might more fully enter into the identity that God has always held for us: one of his children.

And that is Good News!

Amen.