

Pray

There is power in a name. Anyone given their car a name? A few years ago, my son's rock band had a beat-up old vehicle named Van Wilder; five guys on tour, the power of being totally free and totally unprepared for winter driving across Canada, with no working heater. Van Wilder broke down so many times, it died. They bought another vehicle, named it Vana White.

There is power of brand recognition for corporations naming a sports stadium; securing naming rights can cost millions of dollars.

In the Harry Potter series, the most villainous of all villains is often referred to as "he who must not be named." Even **saying** the name of Lord Voldemort meant that something bad might befall the person speaking.

Choosing a name for a child is an important responsibility. Often parents consider many things when choosing a name for their child. The choice may be to honour a family member or a close friend, or in admiration for a famous person.

I am married to Dianne Elizabeth Greaves. I have a sister named Elizabeth and my mother's middle name is Elizabeth. Isn't there a Queen by that name?

What is the purpose in naming things or people? And how can the Name that is above all names, help us live authentic lives?

Though it is psychologically complex, there are at least three reasons we name things or people:

1. Because we try to convey ownership or attachment
2. Because we're feeling lonely
3. Because God cares deeply

1. We name things or people because we try to convey ownership or attachment.

An avid golfer might name just one of their golf clubs, for instance, if it has some special meaning that separates it from the others. The golfer wants to own that particular hole. Similarly, people tend not to name their pens and pencils, vacuum cleaner, wig or toilet, but if they do, you can expect that that object has special importance for them.

In Genesis ch 2, Adam is called on by God to name the animals, the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. There was an attachment formed in the naming, a trust shown, a covenant of stewardship of all God's creation. We are attached to all our children, and convey ownership in the sense that we gave them life. They belong to us, not in an oppressive, demeaning way but in our desire to build them up, never stop loving them all their lives.

The fall of man and woman, we read of in Genesis ch 3, broke that deep level of connectedness to God and creation. We are separated from God and one another; fear entered the world, which leads us to the second reason we name people or things:

2. Because we're feeling lonely:

We love to name our pets or our plants or the backyard birds who keep us company; the Tom Hanks's character in the movie *Cast Away*, names a volleyball-turned-best-friend, do you recall the name? "Wilson."

The flip side of this? The more likely to anthropomorphize and name certain objects, the more inclined we are to *dehumanize* something as evidenced by names applied to sport teams or mascots, further de-humanizing First Nations, Metis or Inuit peoples. Do I need to mention the national tragedy of the Indian Residential Schools across Canada, changing the names of Indigenous children, assigning a non-Indigenous name or given not a name but a number?

In his book *Mindwise*, psychologist Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago writes, "When you understand when people think of other agents as mindful, you can both try to explain why people treat nonhumans as humans, but also sometimes why people treat humans as objects."

In the ancient, Biblical world, names were important for people to mark the unique identity and meaning for them as persons, as a member of a community. When David was alone in the

fields looking after the sheep, he remembered his name, his community, and his God. The Psalms reflect this assurance of not being alone: Psalm 139 says,

“Where can I go from Your Spirit?

Or where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend into heaven, You are there;

If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.

If I take the wings of the morning,

And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

Even there Your hand shall lead me,

And Your right hand shall hold me.” Psalm 139

A third reason we are given a name is because God cares deeply for each one of us.

In scripture we see that children were given names by their parents, which were significant to the circumstances of their birth or the destiny of the child. An example is the name Moses, which in Hebrew means literally ‘to draw out’. This is an appropriate name for Moses, who as an infant was saved from death by being drawn out of the water by Pharaoh’s daughter. As a man, Moses was drawn to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt to freedom.

Luke tells us that on the eighth day after Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph took their newborn son to be circumcised, as was, and is still, the requirement for Jewish males. That day long ago in ancient Palestine, the Moyle – which is the specially-trained Rabbi who performs the ritual of circumcision – said something similar to, “Name this child,” to which Mary and Joseph responded, “Jesus.” And there it was. He was named.

(photo of David Jesus, the hockey player, # 25 on the Oshawa Generals, the game we saw, thanks to Tom and Marg Graham, Jesus got 2 min penalty for interference and was sent to the penalty box. Jesus is the sin bin, sounds like what Christ actually did for humanity, although the hockey player Jesus probably was guilty whereas Jesus bore not his own, but humanity’s sin...)

Jesus was not **just** the firstborn child of Joseph the carpenter and Mary of Nazareth. He was the promised Saviour, the very incarnation of God; God among us; the God of all Creation, as human as any of us, to restore us to God. The most authentic human who ever lived.

One of the tenets of Judaism is that the name of God cannot be said or written by humans. People cannot possibly know the character or true identity of God, goes the reasoning, so they cannot possibly name God outloud; sounds like JK Rowling the author of Harry Potter series must be familiar with this Jewish tradition in having her characters state, “he who must not be named.” Jews write God’s name with asterisks where the vowels would go (Y*HW*H) and they do not speak it.

We honour the name Jesus Christ, thankful that we can speak his name. Perhaps we could become more familiar with his Hebrew name, Joshua, in Hebrew Yeshua, meaning Yhwh Saves ie., God Saves. Alleluia!

The meaning of his name is what we need to remember. The name chosen by God for this infant born in Bethlehem is a message of encouragement. God has not abandoned humanity. Despite the hardship and sorrow of earthly life, God’s saving grace is always at hand to provide hope, courage and strength for the present and for the future. Jesus empties himself and did not count equality with God something to grasp.

We are

Named and attached.

Named and not alone.

Named and valued.

We are named and attached to God who has given us life, physically through our parents and life in the Spirit we repent and turn to Christ.

We are named and not alone. We recall God’s promise in his word to never leave us. We are sealed by the Spirit in our baptism and belong to God.

We are named and valued by God, who cares for us deeply, but as the word says we see in a glass darkly. We don’t see ourselves the way God sees us. We may not feel valuable or loveable. Our mirror is darkened by sin blurry, covered in layers of freezing rain, hiding our true self. It’s like CS Lewis story in the Narnia series the Voyage of the Dawn Treader. There was once was a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb, the archetypal brat. His name sounds a

bit like Dicken's Ebenezer Scrooge. Eustace Scrubb has the heart of a dragon under the skin of a little boy. In the Voyage of the Dawn Treader, he is magically turned into the what he was internally. He is trouble from the get go. There is a massive storm, the mast is broken, the ship runs aground, rather than help like the others he runs off onto the island, and on this island he becomes a dragon and looking in an island pond he sees his dragon face and visage and realizes all of a sudden the truth about himself and he weeps and weeps and weeps. It all comes back to him and he returns to his cousins Lucy and Edmund, scratches in the sand. In his changed state he is able to help them, he helps them re supply the ship, make repairs and with his hot breath tempers the wood and put in place the restored mast. With his height he helps them see sweet drinking water. They are about to leave and the cousins are not quite sure what to do with the Eustace problem. It was that night on the island, back at the dragon pond he is encountered by a lion. In recounting the story, he said, I was bigger than the lion but I was so afraid. And the lion says you must undress yourself. Of course, Eustace says, dragons are like lizards and snakes and can shed their skin and I can be a boy again, aaaah, tremendous effort, he sheds his skin, stares at the pond and still he is a dragon, tries again, great effort to shed skin and still he's a dragon. He's completely frustrated. Knowing he can't undragon himself, he looks to the lion and the lion says, I must undress you and taking the lion claw, he gets through the scaly skin, into the flesh, past the watchful dragon to make him boy again. It's an act of grace for Eustace to be restored. The look in the mirror, the honest assessment of self is the first step in the recovery that can be made by virtue of grace. Satan's ploys to blind and confuse always turn to God's purposes at the end of the day.

There is pain in the naming ceremony for baby Jesus, foreshadowing the cataclysmic pain on the cross whereby the holy gap is crossed. Jesus is the bridge over our troubled waters for us to safely cross back to God.

to the extent of God emptying himself, taking on human form, emptying himself, kenosis, living, dying even to death on the cross. To the extent that we humble ourselves, empty of our self-will and welcome the Holy One, we grow in the Name that is above all names and the power of His presence, working in us.

On our own we cannot live a fully authentic life, we stumble and fall and forget who we are. We can even forget our name and our loved ones' name. God remembers. In Christ we see a truly authentic, human life. A life lived fully lived.

To name a child is a great privilege and the name carries the hope and promise for what the child will bring to the world. We thank God for the infant born Jesus born and dedicated, over two thousand years ago and for the encouragement we see in every child born today, and in God's future tomorrows. May we bear the name of Jesus well, the name we bear in our baptism.

Thanks be to God. Amen.