

The 10th Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2020
St. Paul's, Wilmington
A Sermon by the Rev'd Raymond J Hanna

I have never really liked my given name. I think Raymond is a dumb sounding name. I'd much rather be a Ryan, or a Brad, or a Jeff, which is my brother's name. Those are cool names. Unfortunately, I was given an uncool name. My great grandfather's name was Raymond. My grandfather's name was Raymond. And my father's name was Raymond. So, like it or not, I'm stuck it. To answer to Shakespeare's question, "What's in a name?" I have to say that everything is in a name. Our names matter. They are not just letters on a birth certificate, or a driver's license— our names put us in relationship with each other and with God. We cannot know God or the other, until we can call them each by name. A few weeks after I was ordained, I was greeting people in the Narthex as they left church. I was feeling pretty cocky because I had such a good memory. Although I had only been there a short time, I was calling everyone by their name. A moment later, a woman stood in front of me and looked me in the eye and said: "and what's my name?" Of course, I couldn't remember her name if my life had depended on it. It was embarrassing. She said, "my name is Marian Rockefeller and don't you ever forget it." I never forgot it. When new clergy come to a parish, their first job is to learn people's names. I confess that am still struggling with that, the COVID-19 virus notwithstanding. Names matter. When Moses encounters God in the Burning Bush and God commissions him to go down to Pharaoh and tell him to let God's people go, the first thing Moses asks God, "is what is your name?" God tells Moses his name is "I am who I am." In the ancient world, and particularly in the Bible, one's name determined one's destiny.

Just for fun, I googled my name to see what my destiny is. I was quite pleased with the results. Raymond is a Germanic/French name first used in the early middle ages, and its literal meaning is "King of the world." I doubt my destiny is to be king of the world, but it sounds good. Another baby name book I ran across claims that the name Raymond means "awesome with a personality that is gentle." I'll take that too.

In past few weeks we have been learning how important names are in the Genesis narrative. The name Jacob we learned means the trickster, or the one who supplants, because he tricked his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance. Last Sunday, Jacob gets into a all night wrestling match with an angel. Although he sustains an injury, a

dislocated hip, he comes out victorious. The prize Jacob wants for this for his victory is a blessing from the Angel. So the Angel asks Jacob his name. After Jacob tells the Angel his name, the Angel says “from now on your name will be Israel, for you have striven with God and prevailed.” Israel, aka Jacob, is destined to become the father of a great nation, Israel.

In today’s Old Testament reading from Genesis, we have skipped ahead a few chapters, where we encounter Israel’s son, Joseph. Joseph is Israel’s favorite son because he is the son of Israel’s old age. Israel loves Joseph so much that he gives him a special present— he gives him a long coat with sleeves. Many of us grew up hearing Donny Osmond sing about that coat with the golden lining in the Broadway hit *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*. I hate to burst your bubble, but the Hebrew translation doesn’t mean a coat of many colors; it means a coat with many shades of the same color, but that doesn’t really matter. What matters is that this fancy dress coat is a gift of honor from father to son. It makes Joseph’s brothers jealous.

To top it off, Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams infuriates his brothers. Joseph tells them about a dream in which the brothers were binding sheaves in the field. “Suddenly, my sheaf rose and stood upright, then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to me.”

This is the tipping point for the brothers and they conspire to kill Joseph. Reuben convinces the rest of his brothers not to kill Joseph in cold blood, but to abandon him in the wilderness. So they stripped Joseph of his new coat and throw him in a pit with no water. Then they sit sat down to have lunch, which is what we would all do after throwing our brother into a pit. During their meal, they look up and see a caravan of Ishmaelites. Drug runners, who were carrying gum, balm and resin to make medicine. The brothers agree to sell Joseph to them as a slave for twenty pieces of silver. You know the rest of the story. Joseph becomes advisor to the Pharaoh, and he uses his prophetic powers, which ironically save his brothers when they come to Egypt to escape a famine. Joseph’s destiny is tied to his name. Joseph’s name means “God will increase”. Joseph’s life was a testimony to God’s power and presence.

You have probably heard this one before, but here it is again. An avid duck hunter was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he found a dog that could actually walk on water to retrieve birds. Amazed by his find, and doubtful that anyone

would believe him, he decided to invite his most pessimistic friend to go duck hunting with him. As they waited by the shore, a flock of ducks flew by, they fired and a duck fell into the water. The dog responded immediately and jumped into the water, but instead of swimming, he walked across the water only getting his paws wet, and returned with the duck in his mouth. This happened several times throughout the day, but the friend did not say a word. On the drive home the hunter asked his friend, did you notice anything unusual about my new dog?" "I sure did," responded his friend. "Your dog can't swim."

There are two reasons why Peter can't walk on water. the first is that his name means "rock" after all. The second reason is that Peter lets his fear take over. Have you ever been prevented from doing something because fear has taken over your life. Fear has immobilized you. I knew someone who stayed in her house for weeks at a time, not eating, not sleeping, not doing anything, except being afraid. She was immobilized by fear. We live in a culture of fear. We are constantly bombarded with bad news— a barrage of doom. COVID-19 deaths are predicted to double by the end of the year. People are afraid of what the future will bring for our church, for our children, for our economy. The storms of life can incapacitate us, as they did Peter.

The good news is that, for a few moments, Peter was able to turn fear into faith. He is able to be the rock upon which the church is built. That is Peter's destiny. Yes, he falters, he denies, he screws up, he gets it wrong, but then he calls on the name of the Lord. "Lord save me," and Jesus' response is: "It is I, do not be afraid."

More than ever, we as the church are called to be fearless, we are called to step into the storm, we are called to have faith that our destiny, like Israel's, is to be blessed by God, even, and especially, in the midst of struggle. Our destiny, like Joseph's, is to increase the world's knowledge of God's saving power and goodness. Like Peter, our destiny is to be the flawed messengers of faith. We all share the same destiny. We share the same name. We are Christians. The name Christian means, "Christ bearer." We are called to be Christ to one another. Our destiny is to be his hands and feet, his compassion and mercy, his justice and peace. Our destiny is to love as Christ love us. Our destiny is to be the light of Christ in a dark and hurting world. And when we live up to our name, we have nothing to fear because Jesus greets us: "It is I, do not be afraid."