

*What's In A Name?*

**A sermon preached by**  
James F. McIntire

**Texts:**

John 10:11-18

Acts 4:8-12

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**Hope United Methodist Church**

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: [www.HavHopeUMC.org](http://www.HavHopeUMC.org)

Office: [HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net)

Pastor: [HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net](mailto:HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net)

**John 10: 11-18**

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12** The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. **13** The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. **14** I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, **15** just as [God] knows me and I know [God]. And I lay down my life for the sheep. **16** I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. **17** For this reason [God] loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. **18** No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from [God]."

**Acts 4: 8-12**

**5** The next day [after Peter and John were arrested for having healed people] their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, **6** with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. **7** When they had made the prisoners [Peter and John] stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you [heal these people]?" **8** Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, **9** if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, **10** let it be known to all of you, and to all the people, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, [who was] crucified, whom God raised from the dead. **11** This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' **12** There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."



Let's call God ... Joe. No, not Joe, let's call God ... Helen. No, no, no ... let's call God ... Steve. Yeah, I like that, Steve. Or no, better yet, let's call God ... Congolia. Yeah ... that's it ... that's great ... Congolia Breckenridge. I've liked that name ever since I heard George Carlin use it in a comedy bit years ago. God is now to be known by the name, Congolia Breckenridge. No, we can't do that, can we?!?!? No, I suppose not.

According to ancient Hebrew tradition, it was not proper to give God a name – because if God has a name then God has limitations. A name boxes God in and stifles God's unlimited presence. If we call God Congolia, then God can only be Congolia and God can never be Joe or Helen or Steve. If we give God a name, then God is limited to only being whoever that name is associated with. The God of the ancient Hebrews was beyond limitation, beyond boundaries. The God of the Hebrews had created life from absolutely nothing. The God of the Hebrews had pulled this ancient peoples from enslavement by the most civilized and powerful nation in the world. The God of the Hebrews knew no boundaries, had no limitations.

One lazy afternoon, the herder Moses found himself being drawn to Horeb, a place which the ancients knew as the mountain of God. From a bush that would not be consumed by a fire which burned from within it, God's presence was revealed to Moses. And Moses asked God, "What is your name? If the Israelites ask me your name, what am I going to tell them?" God reveals God's self to Moses – "go tell the Israelites that 'I AM' has sent you to them."

"I AM who I AM," God explains to Moses. I am YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of your mother and father. I am the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, the God of Jacob and Rachel and Leah. "This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations." (Exodus 3).

"I AM" is *who* God is, is *what* God is, describes *all* that can be described about God. The Israelites as they left Egypt assigned to their God four letters – YHWH (*Yod.He.Vav.He*) so that became the divine representation for the God who was revealed to Moses on the mountain. Not Joe or Helen or Steve or even Congolia, but YHWH. It's not a name; it's a designation to represent only the ability to refer to God without limiting or confining God's presence.

The *tetragrammaton*, a Greek word, is how we refer to that Name today – tetra means four for the four letters. Even the designation YHWH became too sacred for some people to consider acceptable, too holy to pronounce using a human mouth. In place of the four letters, the *tetragrammaton*, the ancients substituted Hebrew words such as *Adonai* meaning "lord" or *Elohim* meaning "god", or often today you'll hear the word *Ha-Shem* in Jewish reading of scripture. The more recent Greek translators of Hebrew scripture adopted the word *Kyrios* for the Name (meaning Lord – as in *Kyrie elaison*, Lord have mercy). The Latin text (The Vulgate) used the word *Dominus* for the Name (so we refer to AD or *Anno Dominus*, Year of the Lord).

If you look in any English translation of the Bible – KJ, RSV, NKJ, NRSV, etc) you will see the word Lord in all capital letters (**LORD**) in those places where the Name YHWH shows up in the original Hebrew language. So then, when you read your Bible and you come across **LORD**, you are reading a proper name that we have assigned to God. You could very easily use the title YHWH in each of those places where you find **LORD**.

So, when God spoke to Moses, and we read "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, has sent me ...'", what would be the better translation is, YHWH, the God of your ancestors has sent me." But we prefer a proper name so we can get a better grasp on the God who we are referring to. We need to call God something – and I suppose Congolia Breckenridge wouldn't have caught on so easily – so we came up with Yahweh, or in English, Lord.

A name helps to define who we are. My name is James, from the Hebrew Jacob (*ya.a.kov*) meaning supplanter or replacer. Jim. It's been with me for 49 years now and it has helped define who I am. Some people call me Pastor – that's what I am, not who I am. Some people refer to me using the title attached to my ordination – “reverend”—but that's an adjective to describe how people *think* I am, not *who* I am. My name was chosen for me by my parents, borrowed from my father's brother and from their grandfather. My parents picked it to fit me as I came into the world – picked for me, not the baby next to me in the nursery. They didn't say, “Oh, look at that cute baby next to ours. Let's call that one ‘James’.” No, they gave that name to me.

For each of my children, we spent a lot of time deciding on names. We spent the entire 9 months each time, in fact, paging through name books, listening, writing them out, trying different combinations and variations. Not until what we thought was the right combination did we finally name our children – Timothy, Greek for “honoring God”; Lacey's middle name is Kellen, Gaelic for “little warrior”; Lindsay is Gaelic for “from the isle of linden trees.” Each name helps in some way to define who each child is; each child helps to define what each name means to me.

Yet although our name *helps* define who we are, our name is not *all* that we are. We have characteristics beyond our name. I have abilities that have been given to me by God and abilities which I have developed over the years. I can preach, I can teach, I can write, I can create, etc. Each of my abilities helps to define who I am along with my name. When someone wants to talk about me, they call me “Jim”. (Some people use *other* names for me, but we won't get into that this morning !) They don't have to say “Jim who is short, with blonde hair and blue eyes, that lives in Havertown with three children, who is pastor of a church and can preach and teach and write, etc., etc.” All of the characteristics that are attached to me come to mind when someone who knows me uses my name. You say Jim in a certain context and something, someone comes to mind.

So what happens when we say YHWH (Yahweh) or Lord? It helps to define who God is. But it doesn't define all of who or what God is. God means so many different things to us – God has so many different characteristics – that we have come up with any number of adjectives and names for God – metaphors for God.

Father. We sometimes refer to God as Father because it was common for Jesus to call God Father or Daddy (Abba). When we use the word Father we think of a male parent and all of the meaning attached to that idea. For some, Father is a positive image – creator, disciplinarian, provider, strength, stability. Yet for others, Father conjures up a negative image – abandonment, abuse, absentee, weakness, anger. The metaphor Father – a name we use to define God – has both positive and negative implications.

At times we refer to God as Mother. Jesus suggests that God is like a mother hen who collects her children under her wing. Mother is protector, nurturer, feeder, gatherer. But Mother can also mean also disciplinarian, soft, weak, submissive, abusive, indecisive. It simply depends on who is listening, who is creating the image when they hear the name, what that name brings to the emotional surface of each person.

Sometimes we refer to God as Wisdom. There is a body of Hebrew scripture and in intertestamental literature and in Christian scripture that is known as Wisdom literature. There was an effort to separate God from just being a part of Israel's history to being the one who transcends all creation – the one who was part of God-ness from even before creation. In Greek translation, Wisdom is *Sophia* and is a feminine noun that we use to point to God. *Sophia* (Wisdom) is a feminine side to God, a name for God, a metaphor that helps us to better understand God. For some *Sophia* creates images of compassionate, caring, delicate, loving God. For others a feminine metaphor brings a sense of domination, neglect, abuse. A feminine image for God, just like a masculine image, can create negative and positive pictures of who and what God is.

Throughout the scriptural books that we refer to as the New Testament, we find names for Jesus. At home, Jesus would have been known as Jesus bar Joseph, Jesus the son of Joseph. We find him being called Rabbi – a title for his position in society as a religious teacher. He’s referred to as Messiah, Savior, Son of God, Son of Humanity. Sometimes we’re tempted to refer to him with the title “Christ” as his surname – Jesus Christ, as if you could look in the phone book under “C” and find, “Christ, Jesus” as his listing. But Christ is another title – it’s Jesus *the* Christ or Jesus *the* Messiah. Each time we find a name used as a metaphor for Jesus, it helps define a little more who or what Jesus was and is.

In the Gospel lesson for today, we find one of the passages that leads us to a very popular metaphor for Jesus – the Good Shepherd. “I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel, “The good shepherd pays down his life for the sheep.” The good shepherd knows his own sheep and the herd knows the shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for those in the herd. “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus tells us.

Such a metaphor helps us to gather more information about Jesus and his position in our lives. Jesus leads us as the shepherd leads the herd. Jesus loves us individually as the shepherd loves each and every sheep in the herd. Jesus is willing to put his life on the line just like the shepherd will do for the sake of the sheep.

Does that mean that Jesus is a shepherd? We see artwork depicting Jesus carrying sheep over his shoulders or under his arm. We see Jesus portrayed with a shepherd’s crook or staff in his hand with sheep congregating around him. Does it mean that Jesus is a shepherd? No. Jesus is *like* a shepherd.

When Jesus is referred to as a “King”, does that mean he is a king? No. He’s like a king. If Jesus is the light of the world, does that mean that he glows in the dark with sunrays beaming out of his head? No. He’s like the light that shines in the darkness of the world.

“What’s in a name?,” Shakespeare writes in *Romeo and Juliet*, “That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” A name. “What’s in a name?”

We use names to help us focus our understanding. We use names for Jesus because as humans we have a finite capability for understanding the divine around us. We try to reduce Jesus to human terms so we can comprehend.

If we call God “Father,” does it mean that God is a Father? No. It means that God can be like a father, can have characteristics that remind us of what a father might be like. For some people, it helps to think of God in this way, like a strong, loving father that will not let anything bad happen to you but will expect the best from you.

When we call God “Mother” does that mean that God is actually a mother, a woman who has born a child? No. It means that God can be like a woman, like a person who we know of as nurturing, caring, compassionate, soft, sensitive. For some people, like me for one, it is much more helpful to think of God as Mother than it is to refer to God as Father. “Our Mother, who art in heaven . . .” speaks more to me than any other name we might attach to God.

If we refer to God using one of our human metaphors, we are tempted to think of God in those exact human terms. If we insist on calling God only “Father”, we limit God’s nature to whatever that word means to us. If we insist that God be referred to as “King” and not the feminine “Queen” or more gender-inclusive “Ruler”, then it eliminates a whole body of characteristics that just might help us understand God a little bit better.

We call God Father, we end up thinking of God as a human, male person; we call God Mother, we end up thinking of God as a human, female person. If we refer to God as “he” or “she” we somehow think of God as actually *being* a man or woman, not simply *like* a man or woman.

Is God male or female? If you dare answer that then you are a whole lot more perceptive than anyone else I've ever known.

God is God. If God is a man, then we're in BIG trouble. If God is a woman, then we're in BIG trouble. If God is a human person, then we're in BIG trouble. God is God. Nothing more, nothing less. God is simply God. The reason we gather here this morning is to worship God as God, not as a human man or a human woman. The reason we adore God, we praise God, we turn to God when in need or when we give thanks or when we're simply lost is because God is God!

God came to be with us in the form of Jesus who was, indeed, a male human being. But Jesus was more than that as well. Jesus was in some way God at the same time he was human. Any idea what that means? I don't have much of a clue but I know that all things are possible through God and that mysteries like that are unfathomable to mere mortals like me. So all I need is to accept that somehow Jesus was human and God-like at the same time. Jesus was in some way God. In human form a man; in reality God who is God, as John tells us, "the Word" who was there in the very beginning.

When Moses went to God to ask what to call God, he was given the best answer. "I AM," God told Moses. That is God – nothing difficult about that. No male or female images attached to it. No positive or negative implications. God exists – always has, always will. God is God. God is. "I AM," you can call me if you need something to call me. "I AM"

Martin Buber, philosopher and theologian, a person of tremendous influence in the Hassidic movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was convinced that the only way for people to know each other and to know God is through intimate relationships. In his seminal work, *I and Thou*, he tells us: "The word of revelation is: I am there as whoever I am there. That which reveals is that which reveals. That which has being is there, nothing more. The eternal

source of strength flows, the eternal touch is waiting, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more."

"I AM." Nothing more. "I AM."

A name. "What's in a name?"

In Acts, Peter and John were confronted by Temple priests after they brought God's healing touch to a man they encountered. "By what power or by what name did you heal this man?" "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth," we healed him, "There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

By the *name* of Jesus the Christ.

What's in a name? To know Jesus we give him a name. To know God, we assign names and metaphors. But are those names important?

No, they are not. By the name of Jesus the Christ that man was healed. Did the name heal him? No. Could God have healed that man without the name of Jesus? Yes, because God has no limitations, only names have boundaries. There is no magic in the name of Jesus – or in any name for that matter. There is only faith behind whatever name we choose to use. Peter didn't heal, John didn't heal, even Jesus didn't heal, and certainly the *name* of Jesus did not heal. God healed.

What's in a name? When it comes to God, a name is a name is a name. "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." What's in a name? That which we call God – or Father or Mother or Sophia or Jesus or Good Shepherd – that which we call God, by any other name would be just as sweet.

Amen.