

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

(Luke 2:21)

Just as in most—if not every—other country on earth, the country of Ghana is a country made up of peoples from different cultures, tribes, ancestries and histories. The Akan people are the majority people in Ghana, and their traditions and culture are very well known and practiced throughout the country. One such cultural tradition is the giving of a person's name.

In Akan tradition, your naming begins on the day you are born, because the first name you are given depends on the day of the week you are born. For example, in Akan culture my day name is *Kwame*, because I was born on a Saturday. If you were a female born on a Saturday, your day name would be *Amma*. If you were a female born on a Wednesday, your day name would be *Abena*, while if you were a male born on a Wednesday your day name would be *Kwabena*.

You would receive your day name on the day you were born;

but you would be kept inside the house until the *eighth day*—an old African tradition—some say so that the divine spirit has proper time to align with you, some say the time is a rite of purification for the mother. Then on the eighth day your naming ceremony would happen, where you are given the rest of your name—part of which gets determined by the number child that you are (first, second, third, etc.); your gender; whether you are named for an ancestor, or a living relative; or an expected profession; or for an event that happened around the time you were born . . .

Because names usually mean something . . .

In every culture and society names may be chosen in different ways and may be based on different things, but research has shown that *names usually mean something to those who have them*. Our names can be very closely tied to our identities, as well as to our self-esteem and self-understanding.

So, for example, it matters to us if our name is mis-pronounced or misspelled; or—as in the case of many who are transgender—if our name is not even recognized or acknowledged; or if our name is publicly associated with something that is considered to be reprehensible or tainted in some way; or if attempts are made to try to somehow take our name away. *Those things matter to us, because our names matter to us.* They mean something to us. Even if we don't like our names, they are still a huge factor in so much that has to do with our identity.

Those of you who have watched the TV drama *Roots*—whether it was in 1977 or in 2016—may remember the difficulty Kunta Kinte had letting go of his proud African name, and having to answer to the slave name of *Toby*. Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammed Ali as he transitioned to Islam, and would have a special “whoopping” in the ring for any opponent who refused to call him by his newly-announced name. Malcolm Little changed his name to Malcolm X, convinced that

the name *Little* came from his family's slave masters, and later took the Arabic name el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.

Our names can be very closely tied to our sense of identity, purpose and self-esteem. So, when we ask the sermonic question "*what's in a name?*" that question can be answered that "*there can be a lot in a name.*"

II.

On my sojourn in West Africa I was shown many places where the names of our African ancestors were effectively *taken away*. Once they were captured and chained—sadly by both European as well as African slave traders—they became a *commercial commodity*, no longer considered a human being, but merely merchandise, *so their names didn't matter to their captors*.

- As enslaved Africans were chained together and marched cross-country to the African shores of the Atlantic Ocean, *their names did not matter to their captors*;

- As enslaved Africans were herded and locked into sub-human conditions in the dungeons of the slave castles, castles especially built to hold Africans recently kidnaped and enslaved in conditions worse than animals had to live, *their names did not matter to their captors;*
- As enslaved Africans were packed together tighter than sardines in the cargo holds of slave ships; ships that bore names like *Brotherhood; Gift of God;* and even the *Good Ship Jesus,* *their names did not matter to their captors;*
- As enslaved Africans were bought and sold and worked literally to death by slave-masters in the Americas who continued to see them as less than human, who gave them whatever name they chose for them, and who were concerned only with profit at their worker's expense, *those enslaved Africans names did not matter to those who continually enslaved them.*

But their names always mattered to God!

Because God knew—and never forgot—each and every one of their names; just as God knows—and never forgets—each and every one of OUR names! It is because we are ALL children of the One, True, Almighty, Ever-loving, Everlasting, Creating, Redeeming, Sanctifying Mother/Father God!

The God that ALL people call upon—by different names, mind you—but who never forgets OUR name, no matter who we are, and no matter what indignities and atrocities we may be suffering through; be it alone, in an oppressed group, or as part of an oppressed people.

III.

According to our gospel lesson from Luke this morning, Jesus had a naming ceremony of his own. After all the angelic singing and praise-filled shepherds exit the scene, it is “back to reality” for the family of Jesus; back to “business as usual”—which seems to be, in part, the keeping of the Jewish Law! Because the very next verse takes us to

Mary and Joseph fulfilling the ceremonial law according to the Torah: that on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3) the child will be circumcised.

That, by the way, has always been an African tradition—which speaks again to the African context of the scriptures.

And also in this case, the *name* of the child was also bestowed upon him; the name that God had already given for this child to be called; the name that the angel Gabriel told Mary to name him in Luke 1:31: “...and you will name him Jesus.” That God-given name means “*God is salvation.*” In Matthew 1:21, Joseph is told by an angel in a dream to name the child Jesus “*because he will save his people from their sins.*” In name as well as in deed, Jesus was charged and tasked with being God’s salvation in the midst of God’s people. And as Jesus went through indignity after indignity, and atrocity after atrocity as he sought to do the ministry he was charged with, some of his captors and tormentors may have forgotten his name even as they were beating and abusing him...

But God never did!

There is no way that our Mother/Father God could forget the name of the one who carried the very pathos of God into the midst of the world; the one who carried into the world the word of unconditional *agape* love that is meant for every heart and every soul; the one who embodied the grace, mercy and peace in the midst of the world that God wants us to know is ours for the taking! Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us, through every *conceivable* as well as *inconceivable* situation.

Because sometimes, my sisters and brothers, we find ourselves in the midst of situations that we could never have imagined in a million years would happen to us:

- Being free as a bird one minute, and being captured and enslaved for life the very next minute;
- Living peacefully in your home one moment, and having your home bombed by people of a different faith the next moment;

- Doing everything the cop tells you to do, but getting shot and killed by the cop anyhow;
- Being forced to go to war for your country, and not being accepted by the society you fought for, nor able to receive healing when you return;
- Having retirement savings one day, and having no retirement savings the next day;
- Facing the fact that your child has been shot and killed as they sat in their classroom trying to learn one winter afternoon;
- Watching a loved one get dressed in a police uniform in the morning, and identifying their dead body in the evening;
- Feeling fit as a fiddle when you awaken, and being told you have three months to live by the time it is lunch hour;

Sometimes, we find ourselves in situations that we could never imagine in a million years would happen to us.

It's a good thing that our Mother/Father God, Jesus our Lord and Brother, and the amazing Spirit of the Living God together have a lot of names that we can use to call out to them in our times of distress:

✚ We can call upon the one whose name is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace;

✚ We can call upon the one whose name is Sure Foundation, the Ancient of Days, the Lamb of God, and the Light of the World;

✚ We can call upon the one whose name is Resurrection and the Life, the Author of our Faith, the Alpha and the Omega, the Lion of the tribe of Judah;

✚ We can call upon the one whose name is Rock in a Weary Land, Shelter in a Time of Storm, Strength to the Poor and Needy, and a Way When There Is Simply No Other Way at All;

✚ We can call upon the one who has been called the Rose of Sharon, the Lily of the Valley, the Great Amen, and the Bright Morning Star;

✚ The one to whom some of us have just thrown up our hands and
shouted “Father, I stretch my hands to thee; no other help I know;
If thou withdraw thy hands from me; whither shall I go?”

What’s in a name? I’ll tell you what’s in GOD’S name:

Everything that we need, to get through everything we will ever face.

AMEN

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