

“A New Name” / Isaiah 62:1-5 / 20 January 2013

“And you shall be called by a new name, that the mouth of the Lord shall give.” That’s a nice thought from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, a new name, a whole new identity, a clean slate, a fresh start. It’s the dream that launched the Mayflower, the dream that pushed the American frontier ever westward. Have you ever wanted to go away to someplace new, start over, maybe even assume a completely different name?

The difficult part about living into a new name is mostly just living down the old one. That’s why, if you want to take on a new name, you’d do best to relocate to a new place first. Old names linger. Well, just consider the name “Pittsburgh.” Since the 1990s, national magazines have been calling Pittsburgh “America’s Most Livable City,” but nobody ever quite believes them. Every time someone from the coast discovers the cultural scene here in Pittsburgh, they go home and tell everyone just how surprised they were. But truly, no one believes them. I recently heard about a visitor from New York who noticed the Carnegie Science Center and said to her hostess, “Oh, did you have CARnegies all the way out here?” (Actually, they were the CarNEGies, and they were from here.) No matter how much the journals talk about the city’s economic rebirth and stability, its innovative new “green” architecture, its historic neighborhoods, its urban vitality, the world still imagines rusting steel mills. When you say “Pittsburgh,” people think *The Deer Hunter*, a hardscrabble place of factories, and train yards, and flannels.

It’s hard to live into a new name, mostly because it’s so tough to shed the old one. Then again, sometimes we’re the ones who insist on seeing ourselves in unflattering ways. When the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) declared that they would meet in Pittsburgh in 2012, we were all a little surprised by the unexpected attention from the national church. Whenever the GA meets in a city, they try to develop a nice logo that lifts up some prominent visual image to represent that city. When they met in Minneapolis, for example, they had a nice little blue river, flowing in the foreground of the logo, to represent the mighty Mississippi, which has its headwaters up in those parts. We all expected them to represent Pittsburgh with three rivers. But when the logo was unveiled a year prior to the General Assembly meeting, we Pittsburghers were shocked to see in it not rivers, but a towel! It was a plain-but-tasteful medallion-looking thing, with a cloth draped over the bottom, like you often see in classical art and sculpture. In a stroke of classic Presbyterian hedging, the man who showed the logo at Pittsburgh Presbytery explained, “And here at the bottom, you’ll notice a draped cloth; some people see this as the Terrible Towel.”

In my missionary days, I used to spend some time at church headquarters in Louisville. For that reason, I’d met the man responsible for the denomination’s artwork, so I emailed him about the Towel. I said, “Thanks for not depicting Pittsburgh with a belching smokestack, but the Terrible Towel, really? You know, any one of our three rivers is wider than the Mississippi where it passes through Minneapolis.” Much to my surprise, he responded with a jovial message much longer than the one I had sent him. He said, basically, yes, it’s a towel, but not the Terrible Towel. This towel is going to appear in all our GA logos, no matter the city. It’s represents service, for Jesus wrapped himself in a towel and washed the disciples’ feet, giving them a new commandment, to love one another. This fellow went on to say that their original plan had been to represent Pittsburgh with Tiffany stained glass windows, since First and Third Presbyterian churches of Pittsburgh have some of the oldest and most famous windows in the country.

But Tiffany stained glass proved to be a little too complicated. We locals saw a Terrible Towel where none was intended: a part of our identity that we assumed the outside world had in mind, when it did not.

The hardest thing about taking on a new name, a better name, is allowing yourself to let go of the old name, or the name we assume people will call us. It was a strange day in the life of Israel. They had been freed at last from their long humiliation in Babylon. They were back home in their own native country, autonomous once again, free to practice their own faith, but their children were still acting and speaking like Babylonians. And they still lived with the old shame of having been sacked, defeated, desecrated, kidnapped, and forced to live like their heathen neighbors. Their good name had been dishonored, and since every country had its own national deity, their shame and humiliation had meant that Israel's God was seen as a weakling among the nations. Then, in the third section of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, a promise is made to Israel, "You shall be called by a new name, one that the mouth of the Lord shall give."

What if we truly could call people by names that reflected their God-given characters and callings? I used to pastor a church that sat on the main drag through a small town. Because it was the only town for 25 miles in each direction, a lot of needy folks and drifters would happen through, looking for help. And we helped as many as we could. Fortunately for us, there was a much more grandiose Methodist church just across the street, and most people in need of assistance naturally approached them first. There was one elderly lady in our congregation who ran what she called "the mission cell." This meant that when I was approached with a real and pressing need, I would call her—Lois—and tell her how much the needy party required, and she would make sure I got it. Lois never married; she had no children, and she was tough. She exemplified that old Swedish stubbornness and self-reliance that I will always associate with that little town. Now Lois did sometimes pressure people to contribute to the mission cell, and she could be quite convincing. But I was vaguely aware that she supplied much of that emergency cash from her own private funds. One day, after she helped me to assist a needy family, I said to her, "Lois, what you do is so kind, and so faithful. I always know that you will be there when there's a need. Thank you." And she said to me (I wrote down her words, thinking that I would use them at her eulogy, but she still hasn't needed one) she said to me, "This is who I really am. I know everyone thinks I'm a cranky old lady. But I want people to have what they need, and I feel like myself when I can make that happen." Now, Lois did not believe in shedding tears. She was a stiff-upper-lip kind of lady. But that is the one and only time I ever saw a little tear form at the corner of her eye. What if instead of calling her "Lois," the world called her for who she truly is: Generous? What if her name could be Openhanded, a new name that the mouth of God has given? What would your name be? What would the name of our church be? Our nation?

There are still a few traditional cultures where a child is given a temporary name until the parents get to know his or her personality. Then, when the child is two or three years old, the parents select a name that fits. The original, provisional name might then become the child's middle name, and the new name is the thing that people will be calling that person for the rest of his or her life. Of course, if we did that, then the world might be like an old Walt Disney cartoon with Bashful, Sleepy, Sneezy, Grumpy, Dopey, Happy, and Doc. As it is, in our society, names are conferred upon us long before anyone knows us. Our names say more about our parents than they do about us. But

what if the world really did get a chance to call you as it saw you? What would your name be if it fit your character, your behavior, your qualities, and values? I wonder if we would like those new names, or might the world call us something we don't like at all?

We all walk through life bearing old names that we really don't want. We're all the villain in someone's story, like when you have to fire a lousy employee, bear bad news, act as the bad cop, the stern parent, the representative of an organization or group that you don't really like to represent. One of my life's great trials is that strangers always assume that I'm something akin to the TV preachers; it's a name I cannot abide. We all bear names that we don't want to bear, names that are not who we really are. Ugly American, weird church person, soccer mom. We get called by names that cannot begin to capture our identity. They become labels that prevent people from seeing us as who we are. I came across an amusing article in the Huffington Post about politicians with unfortunate names. It was a series of pictures of signs for political campaigns across the country. One said, "Vote for Frank Schmuck." And at the bottom of the sign, it read, "Yes, that's right, SCHMUCK!" Another sign read, "Lawless for circuit judge." "Jay Walker for tax assessor." "Krystal Ball for Congress." Much of the humor in the article had racy implications that are not appropriate in church. Oh, those old names that we just can't escape!

Better even than being called for what we truly are, is to be called for what we can and ought to be. Better than calling Lois "Openhanded" is the name that has yet to be revealed for her. The Book of Revelation talks about this, too, the secret name, known only to God. It's true that some few people in our lives actually do call us as they imagine us more than as we are: dear, honey, sweetheart, babe. We don't get to choose our names, really. But with God's help, we can live into the best of them, and outlive the worst of them. If people called you according to what they observed of your life, what would they name you? And what might be that new name, that the mouth of God shall give? Amen.