

“Harvey? . . . Irene? . . . Peter? What’s in a Name?”

September 3, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania

The Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”*
(Matthew 16:25, NRSV)



Image Credit: “The Burning Bush,” by Richard E. Hanley, Artist;
From a series of 18 stained glass windows at First Presbyterian Church, Muskegon, MI

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

We had Hurricane Harvey dominating the news this week. The water in many places in and around communities in Southern Texas continues to rise unabated. Those of you who have been through flooding -- including any of you who went through the recent flooding in the West End of Butler know how debilitating and destructive such calamities of the weather can be.

Harvey and its aftermath reminded me of Hurricane Irene's impact in the waning days of August 2011. It, too, was a crippler and did its worst on the Northeastern United States. Particularly hard hit were communities in New Jersey, New York and Vermont. Places we drive through on our vacation jaunts through New England were wiped out; old covered bridges, hundreds of years old, were literally washed away down rivers engorged with mindless, raging flood waters.

This got me thinking about how they name storms. Hurricane Irene: Irene is a beautiful name; it is from the Greek word "Ei-re-ne" that means "Peace", as in "the cessation of hostilities", as in "calm." Hurricane Irene devastated New England -- and there is something not right about that. . . I've told you before there are names you want to avoid -- Jacob or Jezebel come to mind . . . But Irene is a beautiful name. . .

Immediately after Irene in August of 2011 was another hurricane, named "Lee". Lee whirled in and put on the books the single greatest release of water in the history of Owego, New York, and most of the Southern Tier of New York from Binghamton in the east, west to Houghton, beyond the Finger Lakes on September 6 and 7, 2011. The whole area was water everywhere. Elaine's sister's house in the city of Owego was inundated. Four or five feet of water from the flooded Susquehanna ended up in their first floor -- not one week after Irene had already come through. Elaine's sister and her husband finally have their house back; officially reconstructed and raised up some 12' higher -- in 2017. For six to eight months they were living in temporary shelter among boxes of belongings. The whole process took some six years. . . That destructive storm was named "Lee." Do you know the meaning of the name "Lee"? One of the language roots for it means "meadow." The old English for Lee means "shelter" -- hmm, I guess Lee was appropriate because the storm that broke forced people into shelters, out of their homes! That is a curiosity.

The name "Harvey" is from the Old Welsh and Breton (French) and means "iron blazing" and comes down through the twists and turns of language to mean "battle-ready". And so you say, "Gee

whiz, wow . . ." And it looks as though, despite the enormity of loss and displacement and upset you can say that the citizens of the Lone Star State proved themselves "battle-ready"! Indeed, people have responded from all over the country and the world; Presbyterian Disaster Assistance is doing its part; many are proving themselves "battle-ready" in meeting "battle-ready" Harvey!

It is interesting how these storm names come to bear on the people they affect; both Scripture passages today talk about names, too. The first and most important thing we learn from the passage in Exodus, chapter 3, is that God's name is given. Up until that point God has all kinds of names, but here in Exodus 3 is where we discover the personal name of God. And the name God gives to Moses, when he asks, is a verb. In your Bible, this translates as "I AM WHO I AM". The word in the Hebrew is "YAHWEH." It is not a name that I casually toss around because it is a holy and sacred word to Jews, even today.

Hebrew verbs have a peculiar quality about them. They can be understood in both the present and future tense. The verb form doesn't change. "I AM WHO I AM" can also mean "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." It depends on the context what form the verb takes in the present or the future. But God reveals his BEING as a verb -- that's no accident! That God names himself as a verb means that God ACTS! His name is not a noun -- a person, a place, or a thing -- he DOES! And in a way this name implies commitment . . . doing. "I AM WHO I AM . . . I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE;" which is quite a name when you think about it -- Especially when Moses enters into Pharaoh's court with it. Moses knows what goes on there. He was, you will recall, a one-time prince of Egypt. So Moses asks God, "Who shall I say sent me, huh?" And God tells him, "Say, 'YAHWEH' has sent me to you." Wow!

Here's the thing, God as a verb then says, "I am the God of . . ." -- and he starts putting names into Moses remembrance: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, your father's God. . . There is a historical accounting God gives in making himself a verb! As if to say, "I have acted in all these other relationships and places and I will act in and with you as well." And when you think

about it, how do any of us get to know God? We get to know God through other people. When you were raised as a young person, you went to Sunday school, you did the kinds of things in church we all used to do back in the day. And we learned about God from one another, from parents, from teachers, from elders, and from pastors. . . And God was their God before God became our God, you see.

"I AM WHO I AM, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE . . . I am the God of your father, Moses, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob . . . And there is no escaping that we also participate at a particular level in God's action through the people who have taught us who God is in their lives. God becomes God to me, personally, but at first he's Dad's God, he's Dad's Mother's God. Do the work of connecting your knowledge of the living Lord in the hearts and minds of other people that have taught you, have been with you, and have introduced God to you. But in each case it is not so much that God has been a "thing", God is "an action."

My Islamic student-friends at the university -- we have started a new semester again -- have ninety-nine names for Allah (Allah is the Islamic name for God). They will say, "*Allah Akbar*" (God is great) . . . "*Allah is the all merciful, the all gracious, the most holy . . .*" -- and their flows ninety-nine names. But all of those names are really actions that God does. It is not incongruent with what Moses just discovered in the burning bush -- this is the God who acts! God is a verb by name. That should tell us something about our own life in him; acting into the life he gives us by acting into the lives of others. Before I have known God for myself, I have known him acting in the lives of others I have known. What does this mean about our lives lived in him?

The second thing I want to say about these Scriptures having to do with names is this: in the passage from Matthew we have a curious word-play that we see indirectly in the English translation. Just a few moments before that portion of Matthew we have just read, Peter has this amazing moment in which he says, when asked by Jesus, "*Who do you say that I am?*" "*You are the Messiah (the Christ), the Son of the Living God.*" It is as though all the blinders have fallen off and he says exactly who Jesus

is. And Jesus, marveling in this, says to him, "*Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you.*" It's like, "*Yep!*" *Ding-ding-ding!* "*You are correct . . . but see that you tell nobody.*" Because he says, "*The Son of Man must suffer . . .*" But Peter doesn't hear that part. . . In the moment of revelation of who Jesus is, Jesus calls him "Rock" -- "Peter" -- "Petros" -- "Stone" . . . "*You are my rock and upon you I will build my church.*" Jesus is using the name Peter to mean foundation stone, as the piece that you place strategically to strengthen the whole edifice; a foundation you can count on.

But now, in the reading for today, what does Jesus say to the one he has just called "My foundation stone?" -- "*Don't be a stumbling block!*" His name turns on a dime. Funny how that happens . . . You think you are building a good foundation and the next thing you know you're tripping people up! You're getting in the way. Jesus said, "*Don't get in the way! Get behind me! That is to say, 'Get in line!'*" And the word for stumbling block in Greek is really interesting because it leaps right out at us: that word is "scandalon" -- do you see the English word? "*Don't be a scandal!*"

Have you been a foundation stone in your life? -- That is to say, learning about God through others, and in becoming a child of God, yourself, living your life doing the kinds of actions God has called you to do and be for him? Building good things, building good rapport, building good and strong foundations, or are you someone who has your own idea of how things ought to go . . . "*No Jesus, we don't want you to . . . No, no, no not that way . . . No, forbid it, Lord!*" -- And Jesus said, "*Get Thee; behind me . . . You are a scandal to me.*" Whew . . .

What's in a name? What's in the name? Irene, Harvey, Peter . . . I AM . . . I WILL BE? It is God at work in you who promises himself not only to be here with you now -- as he was to your father, and your father's father, and your mother, and in all those relationships -- but to be with you into the future as well. And how will you then live in light of that presence as you live your life; as you live fully into the person you are being called to be -- That is the question.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.