

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
Name of Jesus
Grace, River Forest
1/1/2025

A Name For You

You probably do not know the name Isabella Baumfree. She was born around 1793. That was her name for the first few decades of her life. That is until she sensed and responded to a call from God. A voice that propelled her into a new mission. A moment that called for a new name. She felt a call to leave the city and head towards the countryside to, as she put it, “testify to the hope that was in her.”. With a new name and clarified identity she devoted herself to speaking on behalf of others and advocating for freedom and life for those the world passes by. She was animated by that different name. In 1843 Isabella Baumfree became Sojourner Truth.

Who are you? What is your name? What does your name mean? Who are you named after? Someone or no one in particular? Is there a story behind your name? Does it suit you or does it feel like a suit jacket or a coat you could never fit into, even if you wanted to? Maybe you do not spend much time thinking about it at all. It just is.

Some of the most powerful name stories I have had the privilege of hearing are from trans and gender non-binary people. Those for whom their birth name was no longer who they were at a deep, visceral, heart level. For many of them new names not only create new and open space to exist in a more full way but literally open up a gate to abundant life and resurrection that some had imagined could never be walked into. One Lutheran pastor created a renaming ritual for these situations. Part of it says: O God, in renaming your servants Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Peter, and Paul, you gave them new lives and new tasks, new love and new hope. We now hold before you our companion. Bless him with a new measure of grace as he takes this new name.

Mary’s newborn is called Jesus. Its meaning is something like “God saves or the Lord is my salvation.” He is given this name during the rite of circumcision on the 8th day of his very human life like every 8 day old Jewish boy for millenia. He would then continue to carry that name into this weary world as he unwraps the very heart of the triune God just as he is forever wrapped in vulnerable flesh like yours and mine. This God is eternally made known in the little one. For the carpenter's son is the image of the invisible God.

Throughout his life he would live his name. Going to extraordinary lengths to show the extraordinary reach of God’s love. The love he demonstrates again and again. The one named Jesus is sometimes called glutton, drunkard, outcast. A friend of sinners. (thank God) Carrying this name will lead him to a cross where he is called cursed. Three days later as he walked out of his own tomb he would call Mary by her name. Called by her name she recognizes the one who knows her, loves her, sees her, saves, heals, and delivers. Throughout scripture we find other

names that fill in for us all that Jesus is: the word, the way, the truth, the life, the door, the gate, the good shepherd, bread, vine, and gardener. God- for you.

Today is the 8th day of Christmas. Look at most baptismal fonts and they will be 8 sided. Saint Ambrose said that fonts are 8 sided "because on the eighth day, by rising, Christ loosens the bondage of death and receives the dead from their graves". Saint Augustine said the 8th day is "everlasting... made holy by the resurrection of Christ"

Just as Jesus was given his name on the 8th day, so, our baptism could be called our 8th day. The day that Jesus received us from our tombs. Took us by the hand. When our grave clothes were traded for the garment of salvation. Our name day. When we are given a name that will last. Stretch into eternity. A name that can hold all of the names that we carry in us. Flexible enough for all the names we inhabit. A name that is a gift. Beloved child of God. You are an adopted child of our Abba and sibling to our brother Jesus.

I don't know what will come in this new year. I know suffering has already visited the people of New Orleans and countless other broken places. I don't know what names- either blessings or curses will be hoisted upon our fragile bodies in 2025.

I know who we are and who we are called to be no matter the time. I can hear our names. You are little Christ, Christian, friend of God, advocate, comforter, restorer, reconciler, encourager, truth-speaker, justice bringer, joy spreader, life giver, branch indelibly connected to that vine. Forgiven one. Beloved. What other new names now can be born in you- temples of the Holy Spirit?

As Tich Nat Han writes "Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up and the door of my heart could be left open." We know who does and who always will. His name is Jesus.