

ISAIAH 43:1-7  
PSALM 29  
ACTS 8:14-17  
LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22

First Sunday after Epiphany  
Baptism of the Lord  
First Sunday in Ordinary Time  
January 9, 2022; Year C

### ***Taking Names!***

**“A rose by any other name!” Nobody knows exactly where that delightful phrase was derived, but the first use of the expression came from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet bemoaning the fact that the one she loves is a Montague and that, unfortunately their families, as fate would have it, just happen to be bitter rivals, I guess like the legendary fiercely fought feud between the Hatfields and McCoys, a real life drama once played out in the hills. I think I hear banjos! Reminds me of the movie *Deliverance* and my Appalachian roots . . . way to close to home! The full text is “you can dress up his treasonous actions with whatever heroic descriptors you like, but it still remains treason.” Sidebar: I thought this line apropos since treason has been on our minds this week. “A rose by any other name, as they say. Honestly, I don’t care if they end up changing the name of my town. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, and this will always be home.” In other words, no matter what name, label, or title you give to anything, it always is what it is, its substance or content never changes! It always remains the same! But we all know full well the power of words and the designations we give to people, places, and things, yes, including what the self-appointed apostle Paul called “powers and principalities.” Think of the images that come to mind when we hear people labeled as black, brown, yellow, or white, gay or straight, lesbian, transgender, or queer, young, old, smart, dumb, rich and poor, homeless, and differently abled, you pick ‘em! And today, securing naming rights to buildings, especially sports venues, is a major marketing coup. In these transactions, we are**

**talking lots of money, a whole lot of cash! I mean, can you imagine Lambeau Field becoming, oh let's say, Exxon-Mobil Stadium! Just a thought! Yes, so much of our language, good and bad, is all about naming, labeling, giving title to people, places, and things. It was the first form of communication grunted by our primitive ancestors.**

As we painfully, poignantly, learned a horrific lesson from the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack, this infamous and insidious invasion of our nation's Capital, another date that will live in infamy, as we witnessed live coverage of a seditious insurrection against our democracy, our Constitution, and our government, an insurgence of the worst order no matter how you slice it, ironically the truth of the matter, the facts by a large segment of the populace have unfortunately been avoided, ignored, disregarded, or simply deemed irrelevant, strangely, even perversely twisted, in the interpretive eyes of the beholder. Here we go again! Fake news! Alternative facts! You cannot make up this stuff! What some people swear they see is sadly not what they get! Yes, this was the epitome of domestic terrorism! Oh, what skewed perceptions we imagine when we want to defend an indefensible, untenable, position. Revealing today's odyssey or oddity, one person's patriotism is another person's treason or sedition. Some who claim to be on their oath keeping best swear allegiance to this country, swearing they are the real patriots, and yet they are considered by many, if not most, to be enemies of the State, called to accountability by their loyal opposition, the police, some of the government, and the likes of ordinary citizens like you and me. Nationalism is never patriotism, theocracy always an enemy of democracy. And as former president Barack Obama astutely said at the funeral for the late Senator Harry Reid yesterday, "We're all a bundle of contradictions!" True, very true! Well said! **"A rose by any other name! The bottom line is that a rose by any other name is still and always will forever remain a rose. A spade is a spade no matter what you call it! A spade is not a shovel, as the originator of this quoteworthy phrase once accidentally noted for posterity. And of course, as we all**

**know full well, and as the rock group Poison once not so eloquently put to music in the song by the same name, “Every Rose has Its Thorn.” Yes, naming being our thematic emphasis today, indeed, every rose has its thorns! Come to think of it, with every sweet and fragrant rose blossom, comes a bunch of prickly thorns, always to be found. And yes, therein somewhere is a metaphor for life and living! And hey, I was named for the ukulele player Tiny Tim of “Tiptoe through the Tulips” fame from back in the day! What’s in a name? You tell me! A rose by any other name!**

And of course, I could not begin a sermon titled “Taking Names!” without calling attention to that age old children’s rhyme, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me.” Probably originating in 1830, published in London, and then appearing in 1844 as “golden sticks and stones,” by John Ollivier, eventually finding its way to *The Christian Recorder* in March, 1862, a publication of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and finally in 1872 as advice given in *Tappy’s Chicks: and Other Links Between Nature and Human Nature*, by Mrs. George Cupples. But how about this version by Ruby Redfort, me thinks a much more realistic understanding regarding our propensity to insult one another, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can also hurt me. Stones and sticks break only skin, while words are ghosts that haunt me. Slant and curved the word-swords fall, it pierces and sticks inside me. Bats and bricks may ache through bones, but words can mortify me. Pain from words has left its’ scar, on mind and (heart) that’s tender. Cuts and bruises have not healed, it’s words that I remember.” And life experience tells us that this version is oh, so very true! It is much more accurate than the popular version we assume and even pretend is accurate. Ah, the dangers in the graphically worst of our creative vocabulary, the dark side of linguistic imagination! Yes, we know full well the painful and poignant power of words. We know the power of words with their uncanny and spellbinding ability to hurl injurious insults that cut to the heart and mind, that hurt the ego and

the psyche, to inflict pain in a way that wounds the soul and saps the spirit, stealing our joy, threatening to destroy its unfortunate and unwitting victim. All of us have a thinning skin at some point, a breaking point indeed when it comes to being summarily insulted.

And speaking of a rose by any other name! Jesus is often referred to as the “Rose of Sharon,” an odd delineation seeing as how the rose in question is found in the Hebrew Bible and nowhere in the Christian scriptures, what we traditionally call the New Testament. Talk about taking a moniker out of context, way out of context! For those who are keeping score, the “Rose of Sharon” or Saron, is a Hebrew term meaning “a plain or a level place,” literally describing a coastal plain between the mountains of central Israel and the Mediterranean Sea, north of Joppa to Mt. Carmel.” And while we are on the subject, neither is Jesus the “Lily of the Valleys,” another term found solely in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, both these flowery terms, such lovely fauna and flora, are exclusively found in the Song of Solomon and are used to describe the gorgeous beauty of a certain unnamed and unknown woman, the loveliest flower in the land, a lady of mystery and intrigue, who is the object of affection by a certain unnamed and unknown but obviously smitten suitor, a lustful man clearly attracted, twitterpated by this intoxicating woman of erotic physical allure and sensuality. Yes, these terms of endearment were the biblical equivalent of describing a woman who was obviously smoking hot, a “10” in every way in the eyes of this one hoping to attain the prize. A rose by any other name! And not to burst another bubble or belabor a point, but the Rose of Sharon, in reality, is not a rose at all, but rather is a member of the Hibiscus family, though that flower too is quite beautiful. And after hearing all this incongruent, and perhaps to a degree, vaguely inconsequential stuff, what we really need is rosé far more than a rose! But I digress; I often do! **What’s in a name? Everything! And we are off and running!**

**As we turn our attention to the turning of the liturgical calendar as we enter the first of two periods of what is called Ordinary Time, one short and one much longer, praying there will be nothing ordinary about these Sundays that make up more than half of the secular calendar, we turn aside to see the great sight as we visit Jesus' baptism in the Jordan at the hands of John the Baptist, the ultimate symbolic act of humility and obedience in one we believe had no need for a sacramental act that had only recently become a routine custom, an emerging practice in Judaism. Ironically, at least supposedly in terms of Jesus' need for the likes of such, baptism served an efficacious purpose, symbolic, a saving sign of repentance for those seeking forgiveness of sin, eventually evolving into a rite of Christian initiation. Specifically, we call attention to Jesus' second naming that took place at his immersion down by the riverside, complete with the proclamation "beloved son" bestowed upon this humble man from Nazareth, a significant and revealing acclamation, one of many ultimate titles indeed. Evidently this happening was quite the sight to behold, an event that was normal, routine, or ordinary, then, but that we tend to find strangely surprising, even shocking, because of our fixation on Jesus' supposed sinlessness! Truly this royal, divine designation as "beloved Son" gave deepest insight into a name that was a very telling name in its own right, a name that has absolutely nothing to do with the common name given him at birth by his parents Mary and Joseph. No, at Jesus' baptism we begin a parade, a litany, of what will become a plethora of elaborate titles, grandiose labels, this long and exhaustive list used in an attempt to describe what people were beginning to ascribe to this very Jewish peasant reformer who sought to rehabilitate the faith of his family and forebears, who is fondly, accurately and affectionately, remembered as Rabbi, brother, friend, and mentor, but who after his death would be anointed with the most grandiose images including the highest praise of Christ, Messiah, even coronated with glorious terms reserved solely for Roman royalty, the Caesar in power, including**

**Divine, Lord, and Son of God. At Jesus' baptism a booming voice from the heavens was purportedly a pronouncement that reverberated across the water, heard with crystal clarity by everyone within earshot, "you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Perhaps one of the most disturbing and confusing titles afforded Jesus was the addition of "Christ" to his name, unfortunately becoming like a last or family name, forever combining the very, completely, human person, the man from Nazareth, with messianic lore, equating the Jesus of history, the historical Jesus, with the cosmic Christ of faith, the two images very different, very distinct, radical polarities, as Dale Bishop reminded me, a paradox—I would add on steroids—each perhaps the ultimate oxymoron, a loaded characteristic uniquely enlightening, the two images often in conflict, frequently contradictory, yes, what appears at a first glance to be the ultimate irony. The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith were permanently enmeshed and continue to be so, hardwired in a way that would for all time confuse and confound those who study Christology, academics, clergy, and laity alike. The mechanics inherent in the Jesus and Christ axis forever forming and framing the biblical and theological scholarship that has definitively articulated Christian theology for centuries, has challenged all of us, Christendom's rank and file, every Christian believer, faithful followers all.**

A glaring example of what I wish to convey today is found in the word "Christian," a term first coined at Antioch and likely, in its original form, never intended to be used as a complimentary label. Prior to this moniker that would quickly become a descriptively popular and defining name for the ages, followers of Jesus were referred to as "followers of the way," a descriptive and appropriate definitional name that says everything needed about a faithful follower of Christ Jesus—note the way I prefer to invert his name and title—defining the narrow way they have chosen to live their life. To use the name of Jesus meant a sure and certain death sentence, a fearful prospect, a clear and

present danger. Sadly, the word Christian has been taken hostage in our contemporary context, hijacked and held captive by people who seem to not know Jesus, including absolutely nothing about the essence of this amazing and wonderful man. They may claim to love him, but they apparently, obviously, do not like him very much! These irrationally impassioned zealots are more concerned with getting people saved than they are about feeding, clothing, visiting, and giving cups of cold water to alleviate the myriad thirsts of this life, biblical and Gospel images that they seem either oblivious, or conveniently absently unaware, or that they choose to avoid, ignore, or disparagingly disregard at all costs. Think about the insurrection, the resurgence of a year ago this week. There were those in attendance who actually had the audacity, the brashness or temerity or whatever psychotically induced hubris it was, to carry banners with the name of Jesus on it as if he and Donald Trump were one in the same, or as the early Church would have described it, of one substance. Sadly, for many of us “Christian” has become a badge of dishonor, the word Christian now a negative term that many of us, if we are honest, are embarrassed to admit or acknowledge, only apologetically and haltingly confessing in public, using the label as infrequently as possible. A rose by any other name!

I say all this because the names we give to anyone or anything have import. The titles we bestow and convey often have profound, deep seated meanings, frequently becoming images that transcend any immediacy of the moment, but have lasting value, much staying power. As I prepared my remarks for today, I could not help but recall the British royal family and the propensity of the Queen to bestow elaborate titles on members of her family, each valuable moniker loaded with meaning in terms of family heritage, places of import and tradition, laden with ancestral significance. Labeling is our way to further delineate, to define, to interpret and identify, to clarify, our reality. Imagine shopping in a grocery store without labels that not only

name a product and add to its appeal but describe in detail its contents. What's in a name? A whole lot of something. In today's Witness from the Gospels in Luke, this lection begins a journey as one of four elaborate Gospel stories all designed, not only to describe the person and work of Jesus, exaggeratingly elaborating his exploits, detailing his mission and ministry, but to image the mystery the Bible calls the Incarnation, to articulate incarnational theology all commiserate with the Christ event. Heaping extravagant words of praise, the most flattering adjectives the human mind can conceive, lavishing words and phrases, upon this larger-than-life personality whose life demanded the most creative and imaginative language possible in our vainest and finite attempts to describe his person, his being, language that is almost taken to a literary artform. As I have said about attempting to describe and define God, all words are lacking, the same holding true when we attempt to describe the complexity of this human one who was a mere man, dare we say nothing but a mortal—shocking to hear, I am sure—but indeed, yes, a finite human being who by all accounts had an incredibly intuitive grasp of the infinite, who seemed to somehow, at least from our limited perspective, was able to tap into, to experience the mysteriously transcendent presence of God in his life in ways that no one before or after him has even remotely been able to perceive, much less achieve or accomplish. Think about it, here was someone who had the audacity to believe he could indeed relate to the transcendent mystery of awe and wonder that is indeed the summation of divine mystery. He had the cojones, the gonads, audacity, or the intestinal fortitude, call it as you wish, to dare speak of “his” God in the most casual way, describing transcendence, this Holy Other, the Ground of All Being, this elusive and evasive numinous, spirit, as a parental figure, his Abba, his father, the most intimate, personal, of imagery imaginable. Yes, these extravagant ideas are a mouthful!

The problem we now have today is found in deciphering these ancient texts with their dated concepts, a variety of terms that, while in no way



are outdated or outmoded, must be interpreted and reinterpreted in their context, within their cultural milieu. Yes, the musings of the biblical writers continue to amaze and confound and confuse believers, skeptics, and cynics alike because we tend to put our spin on them, taking them out of context, proof texting these narratives to suit ourselves and our agendas. The early Church struggled with articulating the person of Jesus against the backdrop, juxtaposed to the nature of Christ, a truly unresolvable dichotomy, and the not so compartmentalized but very synthesized creation that came out of their laboratory deliberations. Almost as if experimentally, much of the doctrinal and subsequent creedal content they conceived amounted to a visceral reaction to what they perceived as heresy, an ever-present threat to their dominance and power. Their creatively bizarre theological/Christological musings, devotional mutations all, made the person of Jesus less human, less real, while elevating a counter narrative Christ-figure who was an angry, vengeful, retributive, judge who doled out a quid pro quo justice matrix, a quotient, that would send some to the eternal bliss of heaven while relegating others to the fiery pits of an eternal hell, full of fire and brimstone, reserved for the quote “devil and his angels.” **There is a disconnect between the loving person conveniently named Jesus—a common name containing a variety of theological meanings, including “God saves”—this humble man from Nazareth who was almost certainly, surely, of peasant decent, his roots grounded as a commoner, a laborer, the son of a carpenter, but nonetheless was an incredibly intuitive and intelligent sort who was always consistent, loving, compassionate and caring, empathetic and sympathetic, extravagantly welcoming, expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and vulnerably open, even sentenced unto death as a common and convicted criminal executed by crucifixion for the crime of sedition, accused of leading an insurrection. Compare that most realistic individual to the Christ created in the agenda specific and patriarchally self-appointed minds who went about their manipulative business of establishing and**

developing the early churches, complete with an all-male hierarchical leadership hellbent on manipulating the gospel to suit their narcissistically inclined internal purposes, a bad means to a worse end as they imposed their masculine will. Call it the “imposition,” rather than the “Inquisition!” Yes, the disconnect between the one named Jesus and the one called Christ amounts to a gap way too wide to traverse, an abyss of unfathomable distance, no suitable passageway, no bridge strong enough to even attempt a safe crossing. Jesus became a preordained, predetermined, dare I say predestined, robotical figure, a faux human being, who in the Church’s attempts to make him both human and Divine, person and God, rendered him neither, theologically sterile, a hybrid who only masqueraded as a real human being, but was somehow always believed to be God hiding in flesh and blood. One sermon trafficking company is hawking a homily for today called “Like Us in Every Respect,” proving my point by portraying Jesus as merely human-like or “humanesque”, a facsimile thereof, but not at all the real thing, a pretender of bodily and biblical proportions. Yes, he is a chip off the old block, masquerading as a man! Interpreting him as the ultimate lamb of God and thus the ultimate sacrifice, quickly spawned the heresy of what came to be called Substitutionary Atonement, nonsensical psychobabble that only served to reinforce images of inferiority inherent in the tainted seed of human evil, the product of the Fall in the Garden, the theological offspring of Original Sin. This aberration is the antithesis of a loving, gracious God of mercy and peace, advancing a heretically false narrative feeding those who are consumed by anger, guilt, and judgement, and are in need of a heroically divine rescuer, a literal hero on a white horse, hoping and praying against all odds to be rescued. This view only serves to make God a malevolent child abuser, a monster in need of a sacrificial appeasement. And that insanity needs to be aborted in the worst way! Jesus to the rescue! Not so good! Yes, it is biblical, very much in the Bible, and it is also equally bad theology, a mythology we willingly, willfully, continue to

perpetuate because we are afraid to raise questions, to dare critique, to honestly engage and embrace our doubt, and challenge ancient, first century biblical mythologies and the accompanying pre-scientific narratives they conceive that were dictating the incredibly limited views aboundingly prevalent, dominating the landscape of the ancient world. No wonder so many individuals have checked out of steeple life, choosing to become, what the late John Shelby Spong called, the “Church’s alumni association.” The only acceptable path forward for the Church and the churches is to embrace the historical Jesus, to rediscover the man from Nazareth, to learn of and live into the life of this olive-skinned person of Middle Eastern descent, a real person, who walked and talked on this earth, earthly and not heavenly minded, never his thoughts naively or wastefully in the clouds, graphically showing humanity, the likes of you and me, a better way by living his exemplary life. No, he was not like us! He was one of us! He was us! Yes, it is not about believing a bunch of fabricated, embellished and exaggerated, propositions, but it is about how we choose to live our lives, the ways we engage our world and all God’s children created in the divine image who live within it.

Bill and Gloria Gaither once had a smash Gospel hit called “There is Something about that Name!” Well, in all candor, what is in a name? What’s in a name? You tell me! “Jesus” continues to be rather popular in some cultures! He could have been named Joe or Bill or Bob or Billy Bob, though those are not very good Jewish names from back in the day! No, it really is not about the name but rather it is all about the man, the person, behind the name, the one we have come to know and love and appreciate for the pathway he has placed before us with his tender and painful footsteps in order that we might better, no best, live our lives. No, it is not about the package, the wrapping, the name, but all about the contents! Even so, the ancient writer once penned, and is forever etched in my mind and echoed in one of my favorite hymns, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of

**those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Yes, a rose by any other name! Name that!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and who seeks for us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, ignoring all the rest!  
Amen and amen!**