

“A NEW NAME FOR A NEW YEAR”

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:12

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All of us have been at events where there are a pile of name tags at the door. Boldly at the top is says “My name is...” Then we are asked to write our name in big letters so that we can learn others names and they can learn ours. This is “Name Tag Sunday” at Church of the Saviour. On the first Sunday of every month all of us are asked to wear name tags so that we can get better acquainted. Some people did not put their given name on their name tag, but a nickname. Some people are known by one name here at church and another name in their work or at home. Sometimes, when I am marrying a couple and they bring in their marriage license, the name on the license does not match the name by which I know them. Did you know? A large percentage of people do not use the name that is on their birth certificate! Sometimes the name they use is just a shortened version of their given name, such as “Sue,” rather than “Susan.” But other times the name on their birth certificate, the name given them by their parents, has no resemblance to the name by which they are known.

As we begin the New Year, I want us to think about names today. Names are important. People are upset if you misspell their name, for it is part of their identity, part of who they are. Do you know who you are? What is your name? That’s a good place to begin.

My parents named me “Charles,” after my maternal grandfather and also after Charles Wesley, John Wesley’s musical brother who wrote over 6,000 hymns for the Methodist people. My mother insisted that I be called “Charles.” No nicknames or shortened versions were allowed, and that prevailed until I was in junior high, when I became “Charlie.” In college, I had a close friend who called me “Chuck,” but that never stuck. Folks told me that I just wasn’t a “Chuck,” whatever they meant by that!

After one year of seminary, I was ordained a Deacon in the United Methodist Church, and I became “Reverend Yoost.” That was a new name for me, and while I was pleased to have that title conferred on me, it seemed strange and unnatural for a while. If “Reverend” took some getting used to, there was another new name that also took some getting used to. In September of 1978, I got another new name. That name was “Daddy.” I soon learned that there were responsibilities and expectations associated with being a “Reverend,” and there were also duties and responsibilities associated with the name “Dad,” the name that was conferred upon me again in 1981. In the years that followed, I became increasingly aware that I was becoming a role model for two little boys, whether I wanted the job or not!

I remember reading books in preparation for my doctoral project at Boston University while pushing Tim on the big swings at Lakeside. I held the book in one hand and pushed the swing with the other. As I look back, I’m not sure how I managed to pastor a church, have a

wife, two pre-school boys and get my doctorate all at the same time. But somehow, I did, with a lot of support from my wife Barb during those busy and demanding years. It was one of the most exciting days of my life when I walked across the platform at Boston University School of Theology and received my doctoral hood. I still remember the smile on the face of my beloved Old Testament professor Harrell Beck as he placed the hood on my shoulders. My new name was “Dr. Yoost,” and again, it seemed a little uncomfortable, almost surreal at first. The truth is, I still prefer to be called “Charlie,” but not everyone is comfortable with that.

Then on December 23, 2009, once again I received a new name. This time the name I was called was grandpa, or “papa,” as Vivi now says. How wonderful it is to hear her say that name! That name has brought joy to my life in marvelous ways.

What is your name? Who are you named for? What new names have you acquired through the years? In this morning’s Scripture lesson, Isaiah is talking about newness, about making a fresh start. It is an appropriate passage to read and reflect upon as we begin a new year. First of all, Isaiah talks about new clothes. In Bible times, to receive a piece of clothing from someone was to receive their blessing. Many of us received new clothes for Christmas, with love and best wishes from family members and friends. We can relate. Then Isaiah says that God is about to give us a new name. Probably nobody got a new name for Christmas, but maybe we should think about that as we begin a new year. What does it mean for God to give his people a new name?

I know children who have been adopted, and when they are adopted, they literally take the name of their adopted parents. In our culture, when we get married, many women take the name of their husband. All this takes some getting used to, of course. When someone called her “Mrs. Yoost,” early in our marriage, my wife, Barb, replied, “That’s my mother-in-law’s name!” Before we put the decorations away and think about getting back to work and to school, let’s think about this idea of a new name. I’m afraid that for too many of us, the holidays are something we are trying to get through, rather than the beginning of something new. Let us not put the message away with the decorations, but rather take a serious look at what Isaiah is saying to us today.

In the Bible, when someone received a new name, it signaled a new beginning, a fresh start, a new direction in their lives. When God called Abram and told him that he would be the father of many nations, and that he needed to change the direction of his life, God gave Abram a new name. When Jesus called Simon to follow him, Jesus saw great leadership qualities in this simple fisherman, and he said, “From now on your name will be Peter, The Rock, and upon this rock I will build my church.” When Saul was persecuting the church, and was blinded by a bright light on the Damascus Road, his life was profoundly changed. Saul, the persecutor of the church, became Paul, the evangelist, the greatest missionary the church has ever known.

In all these stories and many more, the new name signifies a new and deeper relationship with God. In fact, Isaiah compares the new relationship that God is going to have with his people to the marriage relationship itself. He says, when you really commit your life to God, it is like getting married! When you are married, you can’t think just of yourself, you have a spouse to consider. When you make a commitment to love and serve God, you can’t go off on your own anymore; you have to think about what God wants, not only for you, but for all God’s children.

A new name means a new beginning. I am suggesting to you that God wants to call you by a new name in this new year of 2012. Oh, I don’t mean that God wants to change your name from Robert to John or from Jennifer to Sarah. In the Bible, Isaiah said that God wanted to change the name of his people from “Deserter,” “Forsaken,” “Abandoned,” to “Sought Out,” “Sought After,” and “My Delight.” I am totally convinced, that as we begin this new year, God wants to change your name from “reluctant follower” to “gung-ho Christian” or from “Not quite

sure about all this” to “100% affiliated.” Maybe God wants to change your name from “Agnostic” to “Believer,” or from “Sunday morning Christian” to “Seven-Day-A-Week Disciple.” Before this year is more than a few hours old, spend some time asking yourself, “By what new name does God want to call me this year?”

In like manner, I believe that God wants our community to be known by a new name. We have already spent some considerable time as church leaders talking about Church of the Saviour and its image in the community. Do people know who we are and what we stand for? I know a church that is known for its spaghetti dinners. Another one is known for having the best craft bazaar in town. Is that what we are known for? If so, we need to ask God to give us a new name!

Some of you know that I am on the Board of Trustees at Ohio Northern University. A few years ago at a Board retreat, we were introduced to the idea of “aspirational schools.” The President listed ten colleges and universities that had stronger programs and more significant enrollments than we had at Ohio Northern. Then he said, “I’d like us to learn from these institutions.” He was not asking Ohio Northern to become more like these other colleges. He was challenging us to become a better and more effective Ohio Northern University by examining the practices and programs of what he called these “aspirational schools.”

That’s what I believe God is calling us to do as we begin this New Year at Church of the Saviour: not to become more like some other church, but to become a stronger and more effective congregation here in Cleveland Heights. Isaiah said that Israel would no longer be known by the name “Forsaken” and “Abandoned,” but rather by the new name: “The Redeemed of the Lord,” “A City Not Forsaken.” I believe that God wants us to let go of our old name, “Half-hearted,” and take on a new name: “Totally Committed.” God wants to be able to call us by a new name: “United Congregation.” God wants us to remember that being part of a church is like being married. It means not doing our own thing and acting independently of the other members and the other groups and the other programs, but rather being in partnership with Jesus Christ and working in concert with the rest of the community. In fact, the Gospel goes so far as to give Jesus a new name: “Bridegroom” and the church a new name: “The Bride of Christ.”

At the end of year it is common to look back and reflect. What I want us to do this morning is to look ahead. What will 2012 bring? What does God want to see happen in your life and mine? What does God want to see happen at Church of the Saviour? What new name does God want to give us as we begin a new year together? What new name does God have for you? What new name does God have for me? What new name does God have for our church? Will we let go of the old and accept the new role and identity that God has for us? Will we allow ourselves to become the people that God intends us to be?

God is ready to give us a new name. May we listen for God’s voice, and respond in faith and trust!

Prayer: Dear God, as we begin a new year, help us to listen for your voice. Help us to hear the new name that you have for each of us and for our congregation. Then help us to respond to in faith and trust. In Jesus’ name. Amen.