

What's In A Name? – December 27, 2015
By Wayne J. Schneider – Cum Sancto Spiritu

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St. Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Words have always enchanted me. In school, they didn't call me the 'Punster' for nothing! The countless ways the subtleness of the English language provides opportunities for double meanings and jokes, has always pleased me. Many languages offer this opportunity, but the English language seems born to it.

Perhaps this is because of its origin. I recently read online that "*The English language doesn't borrow from other languages, it follows other languages down dark alleys, knocks them over, and goes through their pockets for loose grammar*" (Stephen Bordant). Our language is amazingly untidy, a hodgepodge of bits and pieces of almost all human languages. As prolific as this practice is, it is most apparent when we give names to people or places.

If I read to you a story of three people named Faith, Hope, and Joy, you might think you already know them and their characteristics (or not). And you would come to this conclusion from your previous experiences. And these assumptions will remain until something changes your mind. This is logical because names are assigned significance by us. Yet, do we know that Sarah means "*Princess?*" That Richard means "*Powerful leader?*" Or that Sylvia means "*Of the forest?*"

We are not surprised when we see these names in a story. I would guess however, that many of us would not see the connection between the meaning of their names, and how they live their lives. I think we make a similar mistake with Holy Scripture. Because the majority of Jesus followers do not understand the Greek or Hebrew languages, we are left with the Biblical translation we choose. This may be a good thing, or not so much. It is not that the translations are incorrect, it's just that they are under-translated.

It might be an interesting experience if we took a story we are acquainted with, one found in the Holy Scriptures, one that we have heard and read many times, an

incident that we feel we “KNOW” in depth, and tell it without all the over-familiar words. It could be something like this:

At that time a proclamation came down from Emperor Magnificent, that everyone had to register. This was the very first registration, and it was made when the Warrior was the governor of the Glowing Land. Everybody returned to their birth towns to register. God increases and blesses us from the town of Watchfulness in the Circular Region to the Territory of the Tribe Who Pleases God, to the city of Beloved, called the City of Bread, because he was descended from the house and family of Beloved. He travelled with Bitter, to whom he was engaged, and who was pregnant, to be registered.

During this time Bitter delivered the child, her first, and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn.

Did anything especially stand out for you? What interested me, (excluding the inappropriate translation of Mary’s name), was the meaning of ‘Bethlehem:’ “*The city of bread.*” Perhaps you already knew this. Most of the theories for this translation come from the baking profession. There is however, another interesting fact about this city’s name: in Arabic, it means “*The city of flesh.*”

At the center of Jesus’ life is the cross, even in his birth, the cross, crucifixion, death, and resurrection is found. New life and hope are reminders we see and feel in each sacrament of Holy Communion. In the name of his birthplace we discover bread and body, a hint of Jesus’ ministry. From the beginning, the promise of God’s love for us.

As astounding as this is, could there be anything better? If there was AAA in the first century, Joseph’s “Trip-Tik” might look something like this: “From Nazareth go to Judea, from the Town of Watchfulness to the Territory of the Tribe Who Praises God. From watchfulness to active praise.

Here is why the church exists, why communal faith means so much to God. Active Praise. Through our prayer and praise, yes. but also through our commitment to, and engagement with, the world.

In America today, people are searching for answers: What is the church? Why is the church here? Is the church still relevant?

Diana Butler Bass writes in her book, *Christianity After Religion,* "Baylor University researchers explored the specific views of God the Americans now hold. They found that roughly 92% of Americans say they believe in God. However, they also discovered that Americans actually believed in four gods! Not, however, the Christian God, the Jewish God, the Muslim God, or anybody else's god. Rather than dividing up according to religion, Baylor researchers discerned that Americans divide up according to how they perceive God's character. Thus, there are four American Gods: The Authoritarian God (31% of the population), the Benevolent God (23%), the Critical God (16%), and the Distant God (24%)."

By the year 1950, Americans had created a 'choice-based' culture. This culture is obsessed with what WE want and, instead of obligation and convention, Americans shaped a new definition of selfish.

The church exists, however, to empower people, to engage in an active exploration of our faith, praising God through word and deed, serving others, and recognizing the importance of exploring our faith connectively.

It is now the afterglow of Christmas, where even the most jaded still feel some sort of pull to experience the old stories, and hoping to glimpse the divine.

I don't know what prompted you to come to worship this morning: maybe the last time you were here was last Sunday morning, maybe it was last year, perhaps it was a decade ago. But my hope and my prayer for you, is that you leave here understanding that something special is taking place in the world: that God can, will, and is still using people, and that you are invited to come and be a part of that. Alleluia. Amen.