

May 21, Easter 7A (*John 17:1-11*)

It must have astonished those gathered with Jesus to hear that they were beloved.

by [Victoria Lynn Garvey](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue

I don't know the extent of our cat Snitch's vocabulary, but the first word to which she responded after we adopted her was her name. Many animals—including we humans—learn to respond first to names. When a friend of mine started school, the teacher called his mother reporting that her son had been absent the first day. Confused, since she had driven him to school that morning and walked him to his classroom, his mother asked him about it. "I was there," he said, "but the teacher never called my name." A second conversation with the teacher revealed that the teacher had called out "Robert Herrmann"; he hadn't responded because his family and friends had always called him Bobby.

Most folks I know are a bit particular about their name: how it's spelled and pronounced, whether it's a nickname or formal, how it's used and by whom. Identity is a large part of it, of course, and reputation—weighty matters, both of them. Names are permission slips: they invite engagement or even relationship. Being named is important. Naming is important. When people know our names and use them correctly, we can believe that we're part of something—a community, a movement, a relationship.

The Bible takes this naming business seriously. According to its first book, God is the namer par excellence, who continues naming and renaming as salvation history rolls along, up to and including the New Testament period. For instance, God instructs parents-to-be several times on the names of their children. Biblical names often carry meanings that are quite pertinent to the individual so designated: Jesus, of course, the root of whose name signals salvation, or Isaac, recalling the famous laughter of his parents. David means "beloved" or, perhaps more to the point, "lover," while both Hannah and Anna mean "gracious."

The name of God, however, is trickier and not so freely given. When Moses has that strange encounter with the bush in Exodus 3-4, he balks at the mission to which he has been called. Of his five stalling objections, his second has to do with this heretofore—to him, at least—unknown God’s identity. Instead of replying directly, the voice from the bush gives an enigmatic answer, a name which is no name really. “I am who I am” is how English translations have generally rendered the three-word Hebrew response.

Those words constitute a play on the whole semantic field of existence, of being, even of causing to be. Verbal as that nonanswer is, it can point to dynamic presence, to movement and energy. God will further protect the divine name later in the book of Exodus and beyond, with the famous instruction about not taking that name “in vain,” that is, not for the sake of foolishness, for vacuity. Naming is serious, as is this name above all.

Several segments of the Jewish community have continued to protect that ineffable name in several ways through the millennia, from making the name impossible to pronounce in the biblical text by the use of “jots and tittles,” to deliberate misspellings when printing or writing the name for anything but religious purposes, to substituting the term *haShem*, Hebrew for “the Name.”

In his long speech on the night before his death, Jesus underscores what he’s been doing and saying during his active ministry for those gathered with him for one final pre-death meal. Indeed, some of his most memorable teaching legacies—that business of loving one another, servant leadership, the gift and responsibility of intimate and productive relationships come to mind—are recorded in this speech and in the priestly prayer at its conclusion.

It must have astonished those gathered with him to hear and overhear that they were beloved, that they were one with him in some ineffable way, that he had confidence that they would be able to do as he had done and speak as he had spoken. And they, who had been schooled in the traditions of their forebears and his, knew about the sanctity of the Name. To know the Name, they must have learned from an early age, was to know God, to be in special relationship with God, in some unfathomable way. To manifest the Name was, in that society, to reveal God. They, these nobodies, had just been given a gift that was denied even their revered teacher Moses: the name and person of God.