

Sunday, 30 April 2023
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 2.42-end; Psalm 23; and The Gospel of John 10.1-10
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'So, say my name, O God, say my name'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Say my name, say my name if no one is around you
Say, "Baby, I love you," if you ain't runnin' game
Say my name, say my name, you actin' kinda shady
Ain't callin' me "baby," why the sudden change?¹

This late 1990s catchy hit from then RnB girl group Destiny's Child talks about some who is not saying the protagonist's name. There is clear and total name-avoidance, with the suggestion that this may be out of guilt due to infidelity. The would-be partner is clearly struggling to say the name of their beloved. And the song plays on that sense of unease.

We are met with quite the opposite sentiment in the Gospel reading this morning as we are told in John 10:3 "The gatekeeper opens the gate...and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out". Jesus here presented as the gate has no problem saying our name, calling us towards the gate and giving us safe passage through it. This is at once both liberative and incredibly frightening. Because the image here is of expansive possibility but not of ease.

We are reminded in Psalm 23 (KJV):

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;

Death is there. Heartache and sorrow are not erased. There are thieves and bandits in the Gospel passage too. This gate does not give us a rose-tinted view of life. It presents us with a new vision of life through the reshaping of our being in love.

So, say my name, O God, say my name,
when no one is around me, remind me that you know me.

In the human plain, names can be awfully tricky to master. For some of us it is because we do not all have the memory for names. For others of us, it is because we know too many people with similar names and trying to keep them distinct in our minds is just too much alongside everything else we carry. Names can be both

¹ *Destiny's Child, 'Say My Name' (1999), from their second album 'Writings on the Wall'.*

empowering and shaming, and what we are called stays with us, and leaves an imprint on our hearts and in our lives.

Mariama, my name, became Miriam when I was in my undergraduate Arabic classes. When I taught on an international summer school in my youth, many of my students were from Japan. Upon picking them up from the airport, they expected me to be Japanese, I was told, because of my name. On several occasions, I have been called marijuana, much to the embarrassment of those who said this, to which I always reply, “probably just as addictive but definitely not as smelly”.

So, say my name, O God, say my name,
when no one is around me, remind me that you’ve seen me.

Names are important, we know, because they are about identity and agency, and belonging. Let us think for a moment about some of the names that we are known by and some that we have been called. The names we are given and the names that we choose all have part to play in the tapestry of our lives. Being named is part of the key to the Gospel reading this morning but it isn’t all there is for us to hear. As one scholar helpfully reminds us:

John 10:1-18, and even the verses before, 9:40-41, are Jesus’ discourse in response to his healing of the man blind from birth (9:1-41), whose story is read on Lent 4, Year A. Jesus does not stop talking at 9:41 even though the lectionary’s textual delineations are in service to the chapter and verse markings of our modern bibles.

As a result, 9:1-10:21 is all one massive textual unit that follows the structural pattern used elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel of sign – dialogue – discourse. Jesus performs a sign (9:1-7), which is followed by a dialogue as its onlookers try to figure out what it means (9:8-39), and concludes with Jesus’ discourse or interpretation of the sign he has performed (9:40-10:18).²

In John 9 the healing of the man who was blind from birth presents us with a nameless individual who is thrown out of his community because he talks about what he has experienced and how his life has been transformed. He was not allowed in the gate and those who sought to manage the flow in and out of the gate ensured that he would be left out, beyond acceptance, beyond inclusion. He may be nameless in the text, but we recognise that act of exclusion. He has a name in our lived experience. We read in John 9:35 “Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when Jesus found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’. Jesus went to find him so that the freedom to return to a place of being known and loved could be given to him once again.

So, say our names, O God, say our names,

² Karoline Lewis, ‘Commentary on John 10:1-10’:
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-4>.

when no one is around us, remind us that you have seen us.

We know that Marelle Sturrock, a pregnant primary school teacher living and working in Glasgow was found dead last week. We also know that her partner David Yates was being hunted by police in connection with her murder. He too was found dead, with police now investigating this horrific crime. We cannot say enough about the violence against women and girls. We can never give enough time to name all those whose lives have been affected by such trauma.

So say their names to us, O God, say their names,
when no one is around them, show us that we should see them.

The other key part of the Gospel reading today is that we are asked to see Jesus as the gate. And this is radical and restorative because Jesus doesn't employ the same exclusionary practices we see in our daily lives. We heard in the Gospel:

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

With Jesus as the gate, and in the context of the blind man from birth, Professor Karoline Lewis writes:

He [the blind man] is saved from isolation and marginalization. His healing saves him from everlasting darkness. Never again will he wonder where his next meal will be or who will answer his pleas as he sits begging outside the city. He will know the safety and security of community. That salvation in John 10:9 is linked to the promise of pasture and protection (in and out of the sheep pen) means that the man born blind will know sustenance and security.³

Say my name, O God, say my name,
when no one is around me, remind me that you've got me.

So we have a name known to God. We have a gate in Jesus through which we are encouraged to pass and the lens through which we are asked to see the world, one another, and ourselves. Scholarship reminds us that: "Twice Jesus claims, "I AM the door" which will be the same for the good shepherd in 10:11-18".⁴

³ Karoline Lewis, 'Commentary on John 10:1-10':
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-4>.

⁴ Karoline Lewis, 'Commentary on John 10:1-10':
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-4>.

It is useful to note “the uniqueness and importance of the “I AM” statements in the Gospel of John” because “the beginning of 9:1-10:21 commenced with 9:5, “I AM the light of the world.” The image of the door draws on the notion of inside and outside first articulated in chapter 9 with the blind man being thrown out and then reiterated in the sheep pen of 10:1-5.”⁵

The gate of which Jesus speaks is not within a deficit model. Choose me and choose life – that is what Jesus is saying. The authority on which we stand is this: Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose from the dead and Jesus lives again. In that is eternal life and, in our life, remains this option of the eternal. What Jesus makes clear is that it is a choice. It is a choice.

So say our names, O God, say our names,
when no one is around us, remind us what you offer us.

Many years ago now, I read some research that underlined the importance of names within the workplace and recruitment context. The research was highlighted by Harvard Business School and pointed to the work of one of their academics, Katherine A. DeCelles.

In one study, the researchers created resumes for black and Asian applicants and sent them out for 1,600 entry-level jobs posted on job search websites in 16 metropolitan sections of the United States. Some of the resumes included information that clearly pointed out the applicants’ minority status, while others were whitened, or scrubbed of racial clues. The researchers then created email accounts and phone numbers for the applicants and observed how many were invited for interviews.

Employer call-backs for resumes that were whitened fared much better in the application pile than those that included ethnic information, even though the qualifications listed were identical. Twenty-five percent of black candidates received call-backs from their whitened resumes, while only 10 percent got calls when they left ethnic details intact. Among Asians, 21 percent got calls if they used whitened resumes, whereas only 11.5 percent heard back if they sent resumes with racial references.⁶

So say my name, O God, say my name,
when no one is around me, remind me that you know me.

⁵ Karoline Lewis, ‘Commentary on John 10:1-10’:
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-4>.

⁶ [https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/minorities-who-whiten-job-resumes-get-more-interviews?cid=spsmailing-25757313-WK%20Newsletter%2004-03-2019%20\(1\)-April%2003,%202019](https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/minorities-who-whiten-job-resumes-get-more-interviews?cid=spsmailing-25757313-WK%20Newsletter%2004-03-2019%20(1)-April%2003,%202019)

The human gates we build highlight the in and out nature of the construction. Gates are designed to keep people in, stop others from coming in, demarcate between out there and in here. Our gates are both seen and unseen, and have significant impact on people's lives. While some gates are useful and indeed necessary for physical, emotional and mental security. Jesus's model is of a gate that generates potential and life and promise and hope.

Do we dare step through to see what God has in store for our bodies, for our minds, for our lives?

So say our names, O God, say our names,
when no one is around us, remind us that you love us.

Amen.