

Serious Bible readers, and even non-serious Bible readers, I think, would have to agree that one of the strangest features about the Bible is the names. That Bible has a lot of names, and some of them are pretty strange to our 21st century Americanized ears. Like, Rehoboam, and Jabez, and Jephthah, and Ham, as in bacon, but not bacon—Ham. But it's not so much the names that are strange, as it is the places in the Bible story where they do and do not show up.

Like in Genesis. The story has barely begun when Adam and Eve's two sons, Cain and Abel, get into it with one another. The first of great sibling rivalries that ends in a fit of jealousy with Cain luring Abel out into the field, where he kills him. When God finds out, Cain fears for his own life, thinking that surely God will do to him as he has done to his brother. But God instead punishes Cain with an even greater punishment than death. And what is it? Useless living. “You will till the ground, but reap no harvest. You will wander the earth, but find no home,” God says to Cain.

Meanwhile, Eve gets pregnant again and gives birth to another son, whom she names Seth, and Seth has a son named Enosh, and Enosh becomes the father of Kenan, and Kenan the father of Mahalalel, and Mahalalel the father of Jared. What's the writer of Genesis doing? They're giving us a list of names, except this is no ordinary list. It's a death list. For before we reach the bottom of this list, we're going to be introduced to a man named Noah, Noah whom we know is one day going to be told by God to get on a boat because God has decided to wipe out everyone on the list.

“Noah, Noah, I have been looking out over creation. I see the wickedness of my people. How every desire of their heart and every act of their hands is evil. They steal, they kill, they pollute. They're ruining everything and I regret that I ever made them. I'm going to start over with just you Noah. Here's what I want you to do. I want you to build yourself a boat, a big boat, and take your whole family and two of every animal on board with you.”

“A boat, God? Why a boat?”

“I'm going to send rain. We're going to do this with water.”

“Wouldn't it be faster and less painful just to send fire?”

“Yes, I suppose it would. But fire would destroy everything, including all the evidence. And I don’t want to destroy everything. I want to remake it. And for that, we need water.”

(Remember that, Aaron and Elise, the first time you send Lydia to her room for doing something that could make you breathe fire upon her. Today you had her baptized with water, because water never destroys the evidence. It saves it in order to remake it.)

So, Noah goes into the boat. It’s a Tuesday in early August. A month from now, it will still be raining...hard. We know how the story goes. We’ve imagined it together from this pulpit before. At first Noah can still hear the sounds of the world outside the ark. Children squealing under umbrellas as they jump around in puddles. But then then the squeals turn to screams, and fist pounding on the door to up, let us in! Then, around day 25, all Noah and his family can hear are the sounds of bodies, like driftwood, thumping up against the bottom of the boat. When the rain finally stops on day 40, and Noah steps off the boat, everywhere he looks is the evidence of a world he once knew. And this is when Genesis gives us another list. “These are the descendants of Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham (there’s that name!), and Japheth; children were born to them after the flood.” Read Genesis chapter 10 and you can see all their names. What’s the Bible doing giving us all these names? Names of people who died, names of people who were born? What’s the point?

There are lots of ways one can read the Bible. We can read it as a moral guide. We can read it as a how-to manual on life. We can read it like it’s the literal word of God, a book without error and contradiction. Frederick Buechner says we can read it as a tragedy, a comedy, and the only fairy-tale in which the happily-ever-after ending really happens.

I think the best way to read the Bible is as a record of hope. That’s what we get with all these names. “And after Cain killed Abel, Eve gave birth to another son and named him Seth. Can you believe that? Eve dared to have another son.” You know she must have gotten up in the middle of the night—two, three times—to check on him. To make sure he was still in the crib. You know she watched him like a hawk on the playground. It couldn’t have been easy letting her heart believe again, starting a family over again, putting her hope in the world again. But she did.

I love—I mean, I *really love*—the way we get introduced to Noah’s family tree. “These are the descendants of Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth; children were born to them after the flood.” How are we supposed to take this? “Children were born to them after the flood.” You mean Noah’s sons were willing to bring children into a world that almost killed them? They were willing to take a chance on the God who can make it rain? I don’t know how I’m supposed to take this. Should I be laughing or crying? Is it ignorance, or blind optimism, or courage that makes some people do what they do? I think it’s hope. It’s Nelson Mandela going back to South Africa; Dietrich Bonhoeffer going back to Germany; Martin Luther King Jr. going back to Birmingham; Jesus going back to Jerusalem; Noah going back out into the world. It’s hope.

You don’t have to be famous though, with a name everyone knows, in order to be hopeful. For all the names that do show up in the Bible, have you ever noticed the one group of people who never get named? I’m talking about all the people Jesus ever heals and feeds. All the people he sets free from demon-possession. All the widows and orphans and children he takes in. They never get a name. Like the deaf man in our gospel reading today. Mark tells us a good bit else about him. He tells us that that the man lives in the region of the Decapolis, which means the region of ten cities. He doesn’t live out in the middle of nowhere. He lives in downtown New York City, surrounded by people going to and from work and home every day. Yes, he’s deaf, and yes, he’s got a speech impediment of some kind, but for all the people surrounding him every day, someone’s got to know his name. And yet Mark doesn’t give it to us. We can imagine what people do say about him, though. “Do you know the deaf guy who stands around on the corner of 10th and Broadway all day?”

“You mean the guy who stutters? Always holding a sign and asking for spare change?”

“Yeah, that guy. What’s his deal?”

This past week I was at a meeting here in Cumberland where the topic of discussion was our local food pantries and how to get more churches involved in making donations. In the course of our discussion I made the point that while food pantries are a necessary stop-gap measure, we must be careful not to allow them to become our permanent solution. To remember that feeding the hungry is like watering plants. It’s easy. The hard

part is digging up the soil and getting under the plant so you can figure out why the plant isn't growing in the first place. It's caring about education and job opportunity and equal access to resources.

"No one doesn't want to get at the roots," someone said. "How do you know when we're not?"

I dare say, when we've taken the time to count up the exact number of faces in the food line, but we haven't taken the time to get to know any of their names.

If there's one thing we know to be true it's that you can't live in a house with someone, or be in community with them, for very long and not know their name. Mark tells us that when Jesus met the deaf man that day in the Decapolis, he took him aside, out of site from the crowds. I find that odd. If I knew I was going to perform a miracle, I'd want everybody within 10 miles to see me do it. But not Jesus. I imagine Jesus taking this man by the hand—this man everyone else just passed by every day. And leading him aside, Jesus gives the man his full and undivided attention, which is the real miracle of the day. He touches him where it hurts the most—in his ears, on his tongue. And helping the man to hear and speak again, Jesus then takes a seat on the busy street curb as he motions for the man to come and sit beside him. "I'd love for you to tell me about yourself."

"Well, that could take a while. What do you want to know?" asks the man.

And Jesus, looking at the man with a heart so full, says, "I've got all day. Let's start with, what's your name?"

Blessed be the God who knows our name. Amen.