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Called by a New Name

Isaiah 62:1-5 ...and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

Galatians 4:4-7 ...so that we might receive adoption as children.

The season of Advent and Christmas is the beginning of the new liturgical year for us as a Christian community. This is a time when we can take a fresh look at ourselves in relation to God through Jesus' life, teachings, and spirit. We are called to contemplate what we need to let go of and what we need to claim in order to live more fully as children of God and as a community of Jesus.

Today is the beginning of a new calendar year. This is a perfect moment to reflect on a very important difference in how we look at our lives. New Year's Day is about calendar time, clock time. The New Testament word for this kind of time is *chronos*, from which we get "chronology". It is how we measure things, checking off days, marking the passing of years, noting significant events. Yet, *chronos* is something we impose on reality, a way we try to measure life and perhaps get a sense of making progress. *Chronos* is a time line.

The other New Testament word for time is *kairos*. Let's put it this way: *Chronos* time is about checking off the days on the calendar or marking the sequence of events. *Kairos* time is LIVED time, where things really happen. In scripture, *kairos* is life infused with and guided by God's spirit. *Chronos* is about when it happened. *Kairos* is about WHAT happened and what it means, and what it all has to do with who we are and how we live. If *chronos* is a time line, *kairos* is a LIFE line.

A few days ago I celebrated my 64th birthday, which means I am into my 65th year already, which takes my breath away when I realize how fast *chronos* flies by! Where did the *chronos* go?! However, birthdays also give us an opportunity to reflect on *kairos*, all that has happened to us, what it has meant, how it has shaped us. We can look not at the *chronos* of how old we are measured in minutes or hours or years, but at the *kairos* of all the moments that have brought us fullness of life, including the difficult ones. Also, we contemplate the *kairos* of what is going on with us now, and what God's spirit is doing in our lives in this present moment. When we grasp this difference between *chronos* and *kairos*, then we really understand what Paul meant when he wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: *Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day(4:16)*. It is the wonderful mystery of our lives, that we can be getting older physically, with all the

diminishments that go with aging, while remaining spiritually alive and growing.

In this light, these words from Isaiah 62 grabbed my attention this week: *...and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give*. In scripture, a change in name means a change in our relationship with God, our understanding of God and of ourselves. And that is *kairos* stuff. For instance, the change could be moving from head knowledge, or ideas, about God, to an increasing awareness of God in daily life. The new name also comes with the sense of call. What am I now being led to be, to do? What is the work God is calling me to now? The new name can mean putting away old understandings of ourselves and opening ourselves up to a new way of being and living.

I was thinking of some famous name changes. Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali in 1964, joining the Nation of Islam, and later practicing the Sufi Muslim tradition. A fighter in the ring, Ali refused to be conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War. One of his most famous quotes: "I ain't got no quarrel with no Viet Cong ... no Viet Cong ever called me nigger." More recently, Ron Artest, who was anything but peaceful on the basketball court, became Metta World Peace, a challenging name for sports announcers. In the religious field, Thomas Merton became Father Louis when he joined the Trappists at Gethsemani in Kentucky. Yet his given name prevailed because of its appeal to all the people touched by Merton's writings and life, not just Christians. One of the most wonderful stories of name changing comes from something that happened in India last October (Article in the London *Daily Mail*, Oct. 24, 2011). Because of the cultural preference of boy children, parents have often named their daughters the Hindi word for "unwanted". In the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital city, 285 girls were given certificates for new names they chose for themselves from Bollywood film stars or Hindu goddesses. How about that! Young Indian girls claiming their personhood, their very right to exist, no longer called "unwanted," but "Goddess"! The change of a name always signals a change of identity or intention or self-understanding. And it can be very empowering!

In the Bible, a name change meant a new relationship with God. Abram becomes Abraham when God renews the covenant relationship with him and his clan, promising to make him the patriarch of "a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5). We've just gone through the stories of Jesus in Luke's gospel. When Gabriel visits Mary, he tells her that her child will be named for his relationship with God and the work he would do on behalf of the world—Jesus, the Greek form of the Hebrew word *yasha'*, or Joshua, meaning "one who saves or helps". In Matthew 1, the annunciation to Joseph about the birth of his son, includes a quote from Isaiah to say that the meaning of their child will be in the name Emmanuel, "God is with us". There is Simon, Jesus' most eager and impulsive disciple, whom Jesus renames Peter, literally "rock(*petros*)". Peter does become the "rock" of the early community after Jesus'

death and resurrection, shouldering leadership responsibility. And then there is Saul from the city of Tarsus, a Jewish persecutor of Jesus' followers. He is knocked off his horse by an encounter with the living Christ. He becomes Paul (Acts 13:9), the Roman form of his name, because of his mission to carry the message about Jesus into the Gentile world.

So, the changing of a name means a new, or renewed, relationship with the living God. It can mean a new self-understanding because of our relationship with God. The change also signals that one's life is becoming more harmonized with God's life-giving purposes. It signals new life and new purpose. Says Isaiah: *You are no longer named Forsaken, your land is no longer named Desolate. Now you will be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land will be called Married. That is because God delights in you and your land will be married.* Those who speak God's word to people, like the prophets of Israel and Jesus himself, always talk like that, *Once you were that way, now you will be this way.* This got me to thinking how we live by names that God does NOT give us, names that we give ourselves. Stop and listen to the names we give ourselves. Failure. No good sinner. Broken. Wounded. Useless. I think each of us calls ourselves by names that hamper and cramp our living. Where did those names come from? From letting certain experiences or others' opinions determine the way we see ourselves. From living out of only part of who we are—our hurt, or anger, or sense of worthlessness, or whatever.

Those names do not come from God. God gives us our true names. God gives us new names. Once you were called Failure; now you are called Exactly Who I Made You to Be. Once you were called Hurt or Brokenness; now you are called I Am Making You Whole. Once you were called Nobody; now you are called You Are My Beloved. You see, we name ourselves, or let others name us, only on the basis of one part of who we are, or one experience or feeling. We are much more than that. The true Self that God made is far more than any one or even a handful of things about us. God's naming of us calls us to that more, that wholeness of who we really are. Part of our spiritual work is to realize the names we are calling ourselves, the names we have become stuck with and stuck in, and then open ourselves to the new name God is giving us. As with so much else about the spiritual life, this is about letting go of and opening up to.

I really like this naming business. It can be a vibrant key to staying spiritually alive and awake. It is about our relationship to the living God in each moment, each day, each year. It tells us that our name can change, from something that has become tired or rigid, deadening or damaging, to something that unfolds new life in us. I think this image of God giving us a new name could be something we could work with in this new year, something that could bear a lot of fruit. Though Isaiah's words were spoken to Israel a long time ago, when the people were struggling to resettle in their own land after the Exile, we can hear

them spoken to us today: *You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.*

As I was thinking through this sermon, I was not sure how to end it! Then I realized that the ending has to be written by each of us. I can only ask the questions that we each and together as a community need to work with for ourselves: What name is God giving me at this point in my life, you at this point in your life? What name is God giving us as a community now and in this new year? What name is God giving to our nation? Our world? Discerning our new name means we have to listen, be aware, pay attention, yes, the inward journey.

This season of Advent and Christmas reminds us that the truly important thing is being fully alive--alive to God, alive to the persons God created us to be and to the callings God sounds in our hearts. And when we are seeking and contemplating the new names God is giving us, we are living in *kairos* time. It is the fullness of time, and the fullness of life, because we are living from the inside out, from our connectedness to the God who gives life to us and all. Some might say this is about New Year's resolutions. We call it hearing and responding to the new name God is giving us.