

What's in a name? That which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet;

I couldn't help but think of those iconic words from Romeo and Juliet as I pondered the account of Jesus' baptism we heard just a few moments ago.

Only I came to quite different conclusion than the love-struck Juliet. Juliet is trying to make the point that names don't really matter. It didn't matter that Romeo and Juliet carried names of families in a bitter rivalry – all that mattered was the person, not the name.

Today I borrow that oft-quoted line from Shakespeare to make the exact opposite point. Sometimes names *do* matter.

What's in a name? In the case of Jesus, an awful lot.

In our Bible readings for today we came across three names for Jesus, and all three of them carry great meaning.

In the book of Isaiah God introduces us to the first name: *the Servant* – or as many have come to label this *servant* God promised through Isaiah, *the Suffering Servant*.

In our Gospel from Matthew we see the name *Jesus*.

And in Acts we see the name often very closely connected with Jesus: *Christ*. Christ, you may or may not remember, is just the Greek version of the Hebrew word *Messiah* (so Christ and Messiah are interchangeable names or titles for Jesus).

What's in a name? These three names, the Suffering Servant, Jesus, and Christ or Messiah are very significant when it comes to Jesus.

To explain my case, to make clear why Jesus' names and titles mean so much, we need to take a look at some of the names and titles the Bible has not for Jesus, but for us. To do that, let's fast-forward some 300 years in English literature from Romeo and Juliet to that unique and fascinating novella by Robert Louis Stevenson, the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

At the beginning of the book Stevenson's main character, Dr. Jekyll realizes something disconcerting about himself. When he looks at himself he diagnoses that something is not quite right, something doesn't line up. He wants to think of himself as a good person, a helpful and generous member of society. But he realizes that while he wants to think of himself as good, and he wants to do good things, right alongside the good is evil. He looked at himself and he saw "an incongruous compound of good and evil." He's convinced that his bad nature is holding back his good nature. He has the desire to do good things but he can't follow through on them. So, Dr Jekyll, the mad scientist, comes up with a potion to separate his good side from his bad side.

His hope is that when he takes his potion at night his bad side will come out while he sleeps and his good side will come out during the day and he will be free to be the good person he wants to be. However when he takes his potion one night and his bad side comes out, he is far more evil than he expected. And he describes his evil self using classically biblical names:

"I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine... [Edward Hyde's] every act and thought centered on self."

What's in a name? Well Stevenson picked the name of Jekyll's bad side very intentionally. This alternate, evil side of Dr. Jekyll, Edward Hyde is so named not just because he is hideous but because he is hidden. Dr. Jekyll thought he was a pretty good person, but when his evil was shown for what it was, he found out that deep down he thought only of his own desires and didn't care in the slightest who he hurt to gratify those desires. The point of Stevenson's story: Even the best of people hide from themselves what is within – hideous evil.

To understand why Jesus' names and titles mean so much we need to understand the Edward Hyde in all of us. We need to understand what is in that name or title that God gives to the entire human race in the Bible – sinner.

Think about it: what would come out of you if you took a swig of Dr. Jekyll's potion? What deeply hidden and suppressed desires would come out into the open? What kind of Mr. Hyde would you be? How would you feel if every thought you had was broadcast to the world – every hurtful, judgmental, arrogant word you thought, every lustful disgusting thought, every painfully selfish desire from your last week broadcast for the world to see?

If you are anything like me, you'd want to curl up into a ball die because I've got a lot more sin hidden in this heart of mine than I let on... even to myself. If my bad side was revealed as God sees it, I wouldn't think nearly as highly of myself as I tend to.

When God calls us what Jekyll called himself, a slave to sin, capable of tenfold more wickedness than we thought possible there is much heartbreaking truth in that meaning packed name.

We are sinners through and through. We are trapped in slavery to sin. We are hopelessly lost, unable to save ourselves from ourselves – a truth that Dr. Jekyll found out.

Once Dr. Jekyll realizes how evil he really is, he decides to clamp down on his terrible self-centeredness and pride. He resolves to not take the potion anymore. He devotes himself to charity and good works, partially to pay for the terrible things Mr. Hyde had done, and partially to smother the selfishness with acts of unselfishness.

However, one day Dr. Jekyll is sitting on a bench in Regents Park, thinking about all the good he has been doing, and how much better a man he was, despite Mr. Hyde, than the great majority of people.

"I resolved in my future conduct to redeem the past; and I can say with honesty that my resolve was fruitful of some good. You know who earnestly, in the last months of the year, I labored to relieve suffering; you know how much was done for others... [But as] I smiled, comparing myself with other men, comparing my active goodwill with the lazy cruelty of their neglect... at the very moment of that vain-glorious

thought, a qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most dreadful shuddering... I looked down... I was once more Edward Hyde.”

For the first time Jekyll becomes Hyde involuntarily, without the potion, and this is the beginning of the end. Unable to control his transformations, Jekyll ends up killing himself because of his hopeless condition.

Stevenson’s insight into the wickedness of man is profound.

All of us, if we pay close attention and let God’s word reveal our hearts for what they are, all of us are trapped in slavery to sin – even when we think we are being good our thoughts turn to pride in how good we are.

Like John the Baptist realizing how little he deserved to baptize Jesus in Matthew, we deserve so little from God. And this is why Jesus’ names matter so much.

You see, before you were even born, before your first Mr. Hyde moment became a reality, God saw what all of us had become. He saw the sin that corrupted everything we are and everything we do. He knew what the consequences of Eden would be. And praise the Lord, he did something about it – something other than judge and condemn, that is.

He promised to send someone whose sole purpose would be to serve people who cannot stop serving only themselves. This servant who was the delight of the Father was chosen and sent to take up a very important mission – **“To be a covenant for the people, and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness”** This servant would set free those trapped in slavery to sin in this world. This servant would do that by suffering for us.

What we see happening in Matthew chapter three is the inauguration of that Suffering Servant’s work. This is Jesus (which is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua which means “He saves”), who in the waters of Jordan River was declared to be the Messiah, the Christ, which are the Hebrew and Greek words for “Anointed One” – a name pregnant with meaning.

Since the days of Othniel, the very first Judge and leader of God’s people after Moses and Joshua, the God-sent saviors and leaders of Israel were had water or oil poured on their heads – they were physically anointed. And this physical anointing was symbolic of a spiritual truth. God would send his Spirit to these leaders to give them the strength to accomplish what God wanted them to accomplish. Equipped by the Spirit of God those saviors were empowered to do God’s saving work. Every one of those anointed saviors of God’s people pointed forward to the long promised Savior of the world who would finally make things right again.

What we see happening here on the banks of the Jordan River is very much like what we will see President-Elect Donald Trump do in a few short weeks. By an official act of anointing Jesus takes up the names and responsibilities of the Suffering Servant who would be the Savior of the world, the Christ, the Messiah.

This was his Father’s plan, the Son accepted the mission with the Spirit’s help, he would fulfill every promise his name carried – the Anointed One would serve the

people of this world selflessly, then he would suffer and die to set this world free, to be the Savior we all desperately need.

What’s in a name?

For people like us, people like John the Baptist who look at Jesus and realize we don’t even deserve to carry his shoes for him let alone be in his presence and enjoy his love, the names of Jesus couldn’t mean more. We know who we are, a wicked mix of sinner and Pharisee, but God has also made clear to us who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One who took on his shoulders the task of being our servant to save us. Today we see the Christ begin this work and over the next few months through the church season of Epiphany and Lent we will walk with him and watch him do it all for us.

When it comes to Jesus, the importance of the names we see today can’t be overstated. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One come to save you.