

Spokane Friends Meeting

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“His Name’s Sake”

Johan Maurer

One of the customs I like about Camas Friends Church is their “word of the year.” It’s like a name for the year, a theme that we can spend the year exploring and deepening. This year’s name has been “harmony,” and last year’s was “repair.” I don’t know what they will choose for 2026; maybe they’re announcing it this very day! My favorite of recent years was 2023’s word “curiosity,” a great antidote to this current era’s tendency to jump to conclusions.

Those of you who follow the Chinese calendar may already know that the new year starting in February 2026 is “The Year of the Horse,” encouraging us to be strong and adventurous. However, if it were up to me, the word of the year would always be “grace” and every year would be “the year of grace,” because, as I’ve said before, that word is at the very center of my faith, and it might take me a whole lifetime to see how grace will lead me home.

In any case, for some reason this turning of the calendar from one year to another has led to my meditating on the importance of names—that is, your names, my names, and God’s names.

Back in 1978, I was on the staff of Beacon Hill Friends House, a Quaker residence, meetinghouse, and program center in Boston. We decided to have a retreat for the residents, and we chose Thompson Island in Boston Harbor to hold our retreat. There were about twenty of us. Our first getting-acquainted activity was to go around the circle and have each of us tell what our names meant, or how we came to have our particular names. Up to that point, I had no idea how names were like a portal into each person’s history, culture of origin, and family context. Even those who didn’t exactly know why they got the names they had, were able to tell something of how they made that name their own, or equally interesting, why and how they decided on a new name for themselves.

Take me, for example, since I have the microphone at the moment. My name is Johan Fredrik Maurer. At that retreat on Thompson Island, I was able to give a couple of layers of meaning to that name. Simplest level: I was named after my great great grandfather, the young man who left Denmark for Norway about 200 years ago, with a certificate in art. In Christiania, now called Oslo, he became a firefighter, and after Oslo's great fire of 1858, he transformed himself into an architect and developer. Talk about taking advantage of a disaster!

On another level altogether, the name Johan = John = Ivan = Juan = Jean [French] ... all linked to the Hebrew for “God is gracious” or “God has been gracious.” Fredrik means “peaceful ruler” or “powerful peacemaker” and comes from Old High German, which is predominantly a language we know from Germanic monasteries and convents. I doubt any of those linguistic details were known to my parents when they named their first child.

For most of my childhood, my nickname was “Fred,” which in the era of “Fred Flintstone” was not a fun nickname at school. On the other hand, in my preschool years, when my German grandmother called me “*Freddylein*,” meaning “Dear little Freddy,” I could feel the affection behind it. Nevertheless, when I started high school, I decided to stick with Johan, my first name, despite its being constantly misspelled and mispronounced. Only one person on this planet, my sister, is authorized to call me Fred.

If I had the chance, I'd love to go around among you and find out what's behind each of your names. If you've never used this question in a retreat setting where there's a high trust level, I recommend it.

Do we have any reason to believe that all this matters to God? We know that God's own name has value for God's self and for us. There's lots of evidence in the Bible that God's name is powerful, meaningful, and also so very basic that it's hard to pin down. God makes this clear when Moses is being instructed as to his mission. In Exodus chapter three, verses 13 to 15, ...

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is God’s name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’

**“This is my name forever,
the name you shall call me
from generation to generation.”**

Fascinating! No name can adequately convey God’s identity, which ought to be a rebuke to theological arrogance. But just as some of us can point to the ancestral connections of our names, we can identify God socially as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. If there’s anything mutual between God and us about this valuing of names, one clue would be that God actually gave Abraham and Jacob their names; Abraham was once just Abram, and God gave Jacob the new name Israel. We don’t know who gave Isaac his name, but it means “He will laugh,” possibly in memory of his elderly parents laughing at the mere idea that they would have him as their baby in their old age.

Another clue to this mutual sense of the importance of names was in the assignment given to Adam in the Garden of Eden: God reportedly relied on Adam to give names to all the other creatures whom God had created. The point isn’t that this scene took place exactly as described in this ancient story, but that God and humanity shared this high value of naming.

God’s given name among the Israelites was some vocalization of four Hebrew consonants, but was never spoken aloud by devout people, who substituted other names to avoid speaking those sacred sounds. It reminds me of the old Quaker

practice of using alternate names such as “The Seed” or “The Inward Light,” or “the Author and Finisher of our faith,” in part to avoid being too casual with the name of God.

There are many indications in the Bible that God cares about the reputation of God’s name, that it be associated with God’s promises and God’s righteousness, and that it not be misused. The third commandment says, [Exodus 20:7]

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses this name.

In the beautiful 23rd Psalm, David records his experience:

**[God] guides me along the right paths
for the sake of God’s name.**

Biblical characters are aware of God’s concern for this reputation, even arguing with God on this basis. Remember Abraham in Genesis chapter 18, pleading with God not to destroy Sodom:

“Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

In Psalm 9, David is surrounded by enemies but is determined to keep God in his corner:

**Those who know your name trust in you,
for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.**

Daniel pleads with God for the restoration of Jerusalem after its near-destruction in the Babylonian occupation. In Daniel, chapter 9, starting with verse 18, the author argues,

Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”

Jesus of Nazareth gives us another multi-layered name. The name “Jesus” itself simply means “God saves,” and was one of the more popular boys’ names in New Testament times, as it still is, for example, among Spanish speakers. In Luke’s gospel, the angel who informs Mary that she’s to have a son tells her that he is to be called Jesus, because he will save his people—in other words, it’s a functional name. The angel adds that Jesus will also be called “the Son of the Most High” and “the Son of God.” Just as with certain Old Testament names, and with many of the names we were given by our parents, these names locate Jesus socially, directly with God. And “Jesus of Nazareth” locates him geographically. John’s Gospel names him the “Word of God” and the “Lamb of God,” and Matthew applies the name “Emmanuel,” meaning “God with us,” and linking Jesus with Isaiah’s prophecy:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel.” [Isaiah 7:14]

That same prophecy of Isaiah gives us the title of “Prince of Peace” for Jesus.

Several New Testament passages refer to the supposed power of Jesus’s name. Here’s a well-known example in Philippians, chapter two, starting with verse 5:

**In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,**

**being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!**

**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

My heart soars at the proclamation that God gave Jesus “the name that is above every name,” but the political scientist in me isn’t sure what to do with the rest of that passage. What does it mean that “every knee should bow,” and “every tongue acknowledge,” given that we live in a world with many faiths, and our experience with Christianity as a country’s official religion doesn’t give us much confidence? Historically, the most humane and tolerant lands, faith-wise, were sometimes not Christian but Muslim.

I interpret this passage as both ecstatic and aspirational, that the name of Jesus is strong to break down bondages, subdue demons, heal divisions, and offer reconciliation with God and each other. That’s very different from coercing our fellow-citizens into bowing their knees to Jesus. It helps me to realize that the one we’re talking about is the Lamb of God who gave his life for us, not some militant global Christian war machine, flying an official Christian flag while mowing down the opposition.

The place where my knee bows and my tongue acknowledges Jesus is not in a political context at all, but in my own heart. When I pray the Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus, son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” it’s *my* life that I want Jesus to subdue, it’s my own knees I want to bend, it’s my desire to live in the dwelling place he promises to his disciples. The ripple effects of a worldwide community united in such

devotion, living out and enacting God's promises of peace and reconciliation, may end up being political, but it starts with love.

For me, for now, it's enough that he knows my name and I know his.

Queries:

- Have you experienced people saying your name with affection? Can you say your own name, in whatever variation is your favorite, with the affection it deserves?
- When you listen in the quiet of open worship, can you hear God saying your name with affection?
- How do you understand God giving Jesus the name that is above every name?
- How would you name the New Year 2026? What would be your “word of the year”?