

[**Nametag Graphic**] Can we talk about nicknames for a minute? My legal first name is Marshall - I'm a junior. Since I was a baby, my parents have called me "JR.", so technically, I've lived my whole life under a nickname. And nicknames seem to function, at least in my experience like lice - you never get just one. The more you get, the more you keep getting.

I received one of my personal favorite nicknames several years ago at a karaoke bar. I had submitted my name, and when my turn came, the DJ called out, "Next up, Junior Foresters!" Everyone at our table looked at each other and erupted in laughter. As I got up to go sing, everyone cheered, "Junior Foresters!" and a nickname was born.

At first blush, nicknames seem to be just silly fun. They emerge from happy accidents or maybe an intimate moment.

But if you think about some of your longest-standing nicknames, you'll quickly realize they are far from silly. Since I grew up with people calling me a nickname - JR., I get asked all the time what my "real" name is. And for a long time, I always simply answered, "Marshall". Because of course that's what they wanted to know.

But the more I think about it, "Marshall" isn't my real name. It's my legal name - the name on my passport, my social security card, my driver's license, my paycheck.

But when I think about myself, I'm not Marshall. I'm JR. If you ask me to describe myself, to introduce myself, you're going to meet JR. That's how I think of myself.

Similarly, I know something right away about someone by how they address me - if someone calls and asks to speak to Marshall ForastirOs, I know it's a salesperson - someone who doesn't really know me. Because no one who knows me calls me Marshall. Or ForastirOs.

But if someone calls me Junior Foresters, or Junior or RJ or any of the other myriad nicknames I've accumulated in my life, I immediately know something about my relationship to them. Because names have power. They tell us who we are, and how we relate to the people around us.

[**Let's do a bunch of different name tags here?**] Not every name we've accumulated is a good name. Some of us get lost in the names we wear. We run in different groups, offering different names, different identities depending on who we're trying to please. To them we might be the **Fun Guy** (or girl). **Hard-working** spouse. **Diligent** Employee. To them we might be **Dutiful** child. To them the **Attentive** parent. We find ourselves constantly shuffling identities, trying desperately to be whoever we need to be to make everyone happy. Whatever someone tells you to be, you become that with all your heart, until you're with someone else.

Others of us have a different struggle. Someone gave us a name a long time ago and we've allowed it to become our true name. Maybe it's **Ugly** or **Unlovable**. Or **Irresponsible**. Or **Hot-headed**. Whatever the label they've put on you, you own it now. It's how you see yourself, how you think of yourself. And no matter what anyone else tells you, it's this name that defines you.

And still others of us have chosen a name, an identity for ourselves that's not getting us the life we want. We decided we would be **"Successful"** but the long hours and time away from your family isn't building you the life you had hoped for. Others have decided we wanted to be **"Loved"**, but you've given

yourself away over and over and you feel more **Used** than Loved and frankly more than anything else you're just **Jaded**. Or maybe you decided you would be **Safe**, the **Protector**. But you've amassed quite the castle, and all the money or guns or achievement hasn't made you feel one bit safer.

We end up with all these labels, all these names we carry deep inside ourselves. They've become our identity and they're toxic, they're not giving us life, but we don't know what else to do because as far as we can tell, this is who we are.

But what if it weren't? What if we're wrong about ourselves? What if we have a better name, a truer name?

This is our hope - that someone could meet us here, with our names, our labels that define us so poorly. When that someone comes, they offer us a new start. They offer to cast off our names and let us begin anew, reborn, loved purely and truly.

We want someone who can give us a new name, a true name. Because a new name means we don't have to be defined by our past, by what we've done or what's been done to us. A new name means a new life, a new future.

We're in the season of Lent, which is a season of the church year in which we prepare ourselves to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. Lent is a season of looking honestly at who we are, a season of confessing our need for rescue, for new life.

Lent, in other words, is the perfect time to examine the names we carry around and to listen to God, who offers us a new name, a new life. This Lenten series is called "Can You Hear Me Now?" because we're pausing to listen to God's voice, to respond to Jesus' call for us to stop living in death and turn toward the life and hope he offers us.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to Genesis 17. Last week, we saw the covenant God made with Noah in the wake of the flood. This week, we meet Noah's descendant Abram. Last week, God promised to preserve humanity, to keep us from destruction no matter what. With Abram, we see the next phase in God's rescue plan.

By this point in the story, Abram has been following God for a long time - 15 years. God had promised Abram he would become a great nation, but it's been 15 years and Abram still has no children with his wife. Worse, Abram is nearly 100 years old, and his wife is 90 - they're both well-past childbearing age.

[Abram with a Nametag?] This is all especially ironic because Abram's name means "exalted father". Abram isn't a father. He's *not* a great father. He's not a *good* father. He's not even a lowly father. His whole life, every time someone calls him by name, they're reminding him of what he's not - a father.

And now for the last decade and a half, he's been following this god who promised to make him what he isn't, what he can't become himself - a father. And this god has done exactly nothing to make this happen. To this point, God has offered a bunch of empty promises.

So let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' Serve me faithfully and live a blameless life. I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to give you countless descendants."

At this, Abram fell face down on the ground. Then God said to him, "This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them!

"I will confirm my covenant with you and your descendants after you, from generation to generation. This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you." -- Genesis 17:1-7

God gives Abram a new name - Abraham, which means "father of multitudes". It's a name that confirms the covenant God made with Abram, that he will have countless descendants. As the passage continues, we learn that God will enable Abraham's wife to have a child.

God brought life out of death for Abraham and Sarah. And their new names symbolize that rebirth. New names. New life. New start.

This is what we crave. All of us who carry these names with us - Unlovable, Irresponsible, Chameleon, Not Good Enough - we long for someone to come to us and say, "That's not who you are. You are Loved. Responsible. Grounded. Sufficient. Protected. We want someone to tell us who we are, who gives us a name not bound by our past, but a name that pulls us toward a hopeful and beautiful future.

We want someone to give us a name that brings life out of death.

God has promised to give us new names, to call us sons and daughters. But what does this look like? What does it mean for Love to give us new life?

Turn to Mark 8 with me. At this point in the story of Jesus, his followers have begun to figure out he's more than just another teacher. And Jesus has just pulled them aside and asked them what the word on the street is about him. They basically tell him no one has any idea what's going on and then he asks *them* who they think he is and Peter blurts out, You're the Messiah.

You're God's chosen king. The fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams.

And Jesus says, Bingo. You figured it out.

In what we're about to read, Jesus goes on to explain to them exactly what that means:

Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things.

Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. "Get away from me, Satan!" he said. "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." -- Mark 8:31-38

So Jesus tells his followers what it means that he's the Messiah - it means he's going to be tortured to death. And Peter jumps in to set Jesus straight.

[Let's do nametags and images here] Because Peter had put a label on Jesus - King. And for Peter, that didn't mean "go get killed by the enemy". It meant quite the opposite - the King has come and he's going to drive out the wicked and establish his kingdom. And Peter's one of his inner circle - it'll go well for him.

So when Peter hears Jesus talking about getting killed, he pulls him aside and starts setting him straight. You can imagine it, right? Look here, Jesus, you can't be talking like that. What are the others going to think? You'll get them all discouraged. You're a king and it's high time you started acting like one.

And then Jesus flips it on Peter. He says, "Get behind me, Satan. You're thinking about yourself, not what God wants."

There's a lot going on in that rebuke that we miss. First is that Peter [Let's make it "Rocky"] is not Peter's name. It's his nickname. Peter's real name is Simon - a good Hebrew name of one of the heads of the 12 tribes. Peter is the Greek word for "rock", and it's a nickname Jesus gave Simon because he was steady, reliable, like a good foundation. Either that or because he was hard-headed. Maybe both.

Anyway, the other thing we need to know is that when Jesus calls Peter "Satan", he's not just being mean. The word "Satan" is a Hebrew word that means "Accuser". Peter is telling Jesus a King has no business talking about being killed. And Jesus says, Simon, you're not acting like the Rock right now. You're acting like the Accuser. You're looking at this all wrong.

Peter has the wrong idea. He has the wrong picture of what kind of King Jesus will be and that's causing him to be the wrong person. He's not being Peter, the steady rock Jesus needs with him. He's being the Accuser. The tester. The doubter.

So Jesus says, "Get behind me." Which is a weird thing to say, right? Except in the Greek, what he actually says is "Follow me." It's the same phrase he used when he first called Peter to follow him, back when Peter was just Simon.

Simon, you have the wrong idea. You're talking like the Accuser and I need the Rock. Follow me.

Follow me and you'll see exactly what kind of King you're trusting. You're following a king who is going to die, and be raised from the dead because *that's* what you need. You don't need an earthly king, you need a cosmic king. You don't need to be rescued from the Romans, you need to be rescued from Death.

You're an Accuser, and you need to become the Rock I know you can be because that's the name I gave you. You're the Rock because I say you're the Rock and I'm making you into the Rock.

How? Follow me.

Follow me, Simon. Follow me, Accuser. Follow me.

That's what he goes on to say: if anyone would be my disciple, pick up a cross, get behind me and start walking.

To be my disciple, to receive the new life I'm offering, it's going to cost you. It's going to cost you the life you're comfortable in. It's going to cost you those labels you've accepted as though they're who you really are. It's going to cost you.

But what you gain in return is *everything*. You receive new life and a new name. I will make you into the person you were created to be. I will announce you before the creator of the universe and his assembled hosts of angels.

Follow me.

Jesus calls us to abandon that which defines us, that which we've accepted as our identity. He promises that if we forsake our lives and give ourselves wholly and completely to him, he will not abandon us. That if we choose to walk the difficult way of the Cross, if we choose to give ourselves for the good of those around us, we will find life.

When we lose, we win.

When we die, we live.

We are tempted to cling to our names, our labels, but God offers us life. God offers us a new name, a new life. And it comes by way of the cross, by way of a willingness to give ourselves for the good of those around us.

When you came in today, you found a nametag on your chair. Hopefully as we've been hearing from the Scriptures today, you've been confronted with a Name, a Label you carry with you that you know is toxic, wrong, poison. A lie about you that you've treated as truth for far too long.

I want to challenge you to write that name on the nametag.

Communion Set-Up

We're closing today by approaching the Communion Table. This is a reminder of the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was crucified. It's a picture of the extent of Jesus' love for us. During the meal, he broke bread and passed it to his followers. He told them the bread was his body, soon to be broken for their sin. So we take wafers to represent Jesus broken for our sinfulness too, all we've done, all that's been done to us. That which breaks us has broken God.

Later in the meal, Jesus passed around a cup of wine. He told them it was his blood, poured out as a new covenant between them and God. So too, we dip our wafers in grape juice to represent the new life God has made available to us.

This meal is a picture of the fact that you're not bound by the names you've carried with you. As you approach today, bring your nametag with the false label on it. Drop it in the baskets, and then receive communion. Before you return to your seat, take a new nametag - on these we've written one of the many names God gives to his children in the Scriptures. Let this be a reminder that you are who God says you are, that God is making you into the person you were created to be.