

“Hephzibah, Beulah and You”

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Based upon John 1:14-18; Isaiah 61:10-62:4 (NIV)

Years ago, Reader’s Digest included a story submitted by Luanne Olease in Salinas, California, about a kindergarten class in Santa Cruz.¹ The setting for the story was the early 1970s, when hippies, who were starting to settle down after a decade of free love and self-expression of all kinds, started sending their children to the public schools in Santa Cruz. Their children didn’t come to school with names like Melissa or Brett, however. They arrived with names like Frisbee and Moonbeam and Precious Promise. After a while, the teachers in the public schools learned not to question if children showed up in school with unusual names. They just welcomed them to school and got on with their lessons. So when a little boy showed up one fall with a name tag that said “Fruit Stand” on it on the first day of kindergarten, his teachers didn’t miss a beat. They thought the name was odd, but they tried to treat the boy like everyone else. “Would you like to play with some blocks, Fruit Stand?” “Fruit Stand, how about a snack?” He responded to their inquiries hesitantly. But then that wasn’t uncommon for small children on their first day of kindergarten, and by the end of the day, his name didn’t seem that much odder to the teacher’s than the other children’s names. At dismissal time, the teachers had the children line up and led them out to their buses. “Fruit Stand, do you know which one is your bus?” they asked. The child didn’t answer. Again, that wasn’t really strange for a five-year old. In fact the teachers and parents had prepared in advance for such a circumstance. The parents had been instructed to write the name of their child’s bus stop clearly on the reverse side of his or her name tag in case the child forgot or was too shy to speak. So when Fruit Stand failed to answer her, the teacher simply turned over his name tag; that’s when she saw printed neatly and clearly the single word: “Anthony.”

I love that story, and was reminded of it this past week, when I read today’s Old Testament lesson. “You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give,” Third Isaiah prophesied. “You shall be called Hephzibah, and your land, Beulah.” Now I don’t want to insult anyone here who is fond of either of these names because you associate them with yourself, your mother, your aunt, or anyone else you call dear. But I think it’s safe to say that most of us would not automatically answer to these names instead of the ones our parents gave us. The last time Beulah was a popular baby name was in 1911 (and even then it wasn’t hugely popular). It’s been downhill since then, so now the name is ranked 5,600th on the popularity chart.² Hephzibah is even less popular. Twenty little girls out of a million sampled in 2014 bore that name. But the name currently ranks 10,819th on the charts.³ God gave Israel these names out of love, but they aren’t names we associate with ourselves any more than Fruit Stand is. “Thanks but no thanks God,” we say. “I’ll stick with the name Anthony or Roger, Anne or Elizabeth.”

¹ Adapted from <https://bible.org/illustration/fruit-stand>.

² See Babycenter, <https://www.babycenter.com/baby-names-beulah>.

³ Ibid, <https://www.babycenter.com/baby-names-hephzibah>.

In one sense that's OK, because God gave the names Hephzibah and Beulah to Israel and Jerusalem roughly 2,500 years ago. God did not give us those names directly. But in another sense it's not OK for us to reject these names as our own because the speech in which God renames Israel comes at the end of the text which Jesus claimed as his mission statement according to the *Gospel of Luke*. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed," Chapter 61 begins. When Jesus read these words in Nazareth, he said they were fulfilled in him. So the ancient Jewish prophesy is now one which applies to us through Christ. The good news that Jesus embodied and came to proclaim is that our name tags say "Hephzibah" now too.

"Why on earth is that good news?" you may be thinking. It's good news because Hephzibah means "God's delight" in Hebrew. During Advent and on Christmas, we tend to focus on the names of our Lord: "He will be called 'Emmanuel' which means 'God with Us.' He will be called Jesus, which means 'God Saves.'" We don't focus on Jesus' arrival as a name-changing moment *for us*. But it is. The fact that Jesus came to walk with us in our mess, the fact that Jesus came as Love Incarnate, the fact that Jesus gave his life so that we would have life eternal all points to the truth that God indeed delights in us. We are Hephzibah. If we were not, God would not have gone to so much trouble for us.

On Christmas Eve, when the world seems sort of magical because of all the candlelight and music, we may be able to feel for a short while both that God truly is Emmanuel, and that we truly are Hephzibah. Maybe. But I suspect that few of us move into the New Year still thinking of ourselves or feeling as if we are the latter. For those who find the holidays hard, the Hephzibah moniker never really sticks. It falls away like those stick-on name tags that refuse to stick to anything, and leaves them to begin the New Year with names that life has given them: "Depressed" or "Exhausted" or "Overwhelmed." For those who begin the year making resolutions to try to improve themselves, the Hephzibah name quickly gets covered up with another name inspired by our flaws: "Overweight." or "Out of shape," "Still trying to quit smoking," or "Unlovable," "Unfulfilled." Either way we end up beginning the year identified by what we lack, instead of by what we have. We self-identify as flawed, inadequate, or broken, instead of beloved by God.

That's a problem because names have power, whether they are given to us by someone else or created out of our own subconscious. As every schoolyard bully knows, if you call someone a name, what you say doesn't have to be true. You just have to say it enough and it will change how both the victim and the surrounding bystanders see him or her. But the same is true if the name calling is internal. Isaiah knew this when he spoke to the people of Israel. They had come back from exile to a city in rubble. Their nation's reputation was trashed. Their faith life was all but non-existent. After years of being enslaved, their name tags said "Forsaken" and "Desolate" instead of "Chosen people of God." So God knew that before they would be able to rebuild their lives and their nation, they first needed some new names. "From now on," God said through Isaiah, "you are going to be called 'God delights in you.' Never mind about the rubble and your doubts and fears. Never mind about the sins of the past. The one thing that you need to know right now is that you are beloved to me. I am absolutely tickled pink to call you my children. You are my delight, my pride and joy."

Imagine if we all made a conscious decision to begin the year thinking of ourselves this way! Begin 2018 by telling yourself that God thinks you are wonderful just the way you are. Begin the year with a name tag which says Hephzibah on it. If you think you'll forget, you can stick an actual tag on your bathroom mirror, so it's the first and last thing you see each day. But make a resolution to truly own your God-given new name. Then watch and see how that changes how both you and everyone else sees you. As Henri Nouwen put it, "Every time you listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls you [beloved], you will discover within yourself a desire to hear that voice longer and more deeply. It is like discovering a well in the desert. Once you have touched wet ground, you will want to dig deeper."⁴

That quest to know the one who delights in us better, instead of picking ourselves apart or resigning ourselves to misery, leads us to the second new name in today's lesson: "Beulah." Although the famous gospel song about "Beulah land" equates the name with heaven, that's not what Isaiah was talking about in the text. In Hebrew, Beulah means "married," not heaven. When the people of Israel were in exile, it had felt to them as if God had divorced them. So their newly restored life needed to correct that. "I am yours and you are mine," God was saying. "We are in an everlasting covenant relationship together. People will call where you live Beulah land because it will be evident to everyone that you have given your whole heart to me, and I to you. Your eyes won't wander and your hearts won't stray after idols because you have found the one who delights in you exactly as you are. You have found the one who makes you whole."

Have you noticed that when people get married, they almost always describe their love in terms of wholeness? "I have found my other half," they say. "I have found the one who completes me." The unity candle couples use at weddings these days reflects that oneness, as the flames of two candles together light a third. This is the kind of wholeness we are called to seek with God. When we have found the one who loves us more than any other, when we know in our hearts that we are Hephzibah, then there is no need to keep looking for love or approval or salvation elsewhere. This is not to say that you need to ditch your current spouse or never marry, however. I am speaking metaphorically. Paul may have discouraged marriage in his day because he thought the end of time was near. But in our day, we are called to become Beulah not as an alternative to our human relationships, but as a way of enhancing all of our relationships. As God's heart has been taken with us, so we allow our hearts to be so taken by God that our love for God defines and shapes all we do.

Which name do you think is harder for you to accept as your own? Is it harder for you to believe deep down inside that you are God's delight, or for you to put your relationship before God before all others? Ponder your answers before you make any resolutions this year. If it's the former, then make a resolution this year to allow God's love to define you, not your or the world's judgments of your inadequacies. If it would be harder for you to put your relationship with God before others, however, then resolve this year to tend to your relationship with God as you would a marriage. Talk to God each day. Think about what would make your beloved

⁴ Nouwen, Henri J.M., *Life of the Beloved* (New York: The CrossRoad Pub. Co., 1992), 37.

happy. Think about how you can build a future together. Think about how you never want to be separated for long. These are resolutions that lead to wholeness because they lead us to find our true selves in God's grace and love. They are resolutions which recognize that we do not have to do anything become Hephzibah or Beulah. God has already given us those names. All we have to do is work on recognizing those names as our own.

In one of the most beautiful Christmas carols of all, "O Holy Night," we sing "Oh Holy night, the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, 'til he appeared and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." As we face the beginning of a new year, I pray that you will begin the year feeling hope and joy, not just weariness and worry. I pray that you will begin the year with your soul truly feeling its worth because Christ has appeared. He has come bearing a message for you and for all of us: "God delights in you, and God will never leave you. God has called you by name, and marked you as Christ's own forever." Embrace the wholeness which comes from knowing you are God's beloved, and the joy which comes from walking each day in a committed covenant relationship with a God who loves you like no other can. There is no better way to begin the year, or to journey through it. Thanks be to God. Amen.