

THE CALL OF BETHANY

Part 1: Encounter

Luke 24:50-53

Bethany Church

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Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them (Luke 24:50).

Those words come not only from the gospel of Luke, but from the founder's plate of this church at the entrance to our Fellowship Hall. This verse was the inspiration of Bethany. Founding pastor, Richard Harper, and the pioneers of this mission embraced it as their gift from God.

When Diane and I began praying about coming here, I found that verse. I wasn't merely curious about what was happening in this congregation, I was curious about the name. I knew that names are significant. I knew that names are gifts not only from our parents, but also from God. And I knew that names shape destiny.

Gideon may have given little thought to his name. His people lived in fear; and he was hiding in a winepress threshing wheat when an angel greeted him and called him "mighty warrior." Gideon's name means warrior. However, he felt like anything but that. Nevertheless, when he believed in God's hand, he lived that destiny and led his people to fight and overcome their oppressors.

Naomi thought a lot about her name. She was the delight of her parents. She was their sweetness, their joy. The young wife of an adventurous businessman, she left with her husband and two young sons for a foreign land. When misfortune left her a widow, childless and in poverty, she returned. “Don’t call me Naomi,” she cried. My name is Mara. My life is bitter.” But Naomi couldn’t escape her name. It was her destiny. Her faith and compassion made her not only the delight of her parents, but the delight of her people. She is Naomi to the whole world, “our delight.” Her actions in the face of bitter circumstances led to salvation of Israel and the whole earth. Her legacy is King David and much later, Jesus our Christ. Her actions led not only to their births, but to the heritage that shaped their lives.

God gives us names to shape our destiny. God gave a new name to childless Abram. “You are Abraham, ‘the father of many nations.’” God gave Jacob the new name Israel, which means God’s fighter or prince with God. Jesus gave Simon the new name Peter, “the rock.” He called James and John, “the sons of thunder.” He was altering destiny.

We as individuals and we as a body of believers were not named by accident. There is a destiny in our name. In our name is a calling by God, a vision from God.

As I researched the term Bethany I found two different meanings. “Beth” is common Hebrew for house. The “any” (anee) part is less understood. Some scholars believe that it is the Chaldean word “hinee” which means dates. They believe the original settlers called this location near Jerusalem the “house of dates.” Although trees with dates no longer grow there, in the beginning there probably was a grove of dates,

figs and olives where people rested in the shade and ate its fruit. Whether the trees grew naturally or were intentionally planted, they became a setting of restoration and refreshment. That was God's purpose for that place. Those trees and later the community named for them offered shade from harm and food for strength. That was this community's original gift, and Jesus valued it. Bethany became his place of restoration and refreshment. That village became his Bethany, his house of dates, his gift from God.

Other researchers believe the "any" (anee) of Bethany is better identified as unripe figs. For them, Bethany is the house or place of unripe figs. What a gift! Bethany is place and people of unripe figs, of newness, growth and fruitfulness. Perhaps, that is why this congregation became a home for children. In the early days of this church, half the worshipping congregation was under 12 years of age. All those unripe figs made a lot of noise. People found worshipping here noisy. It was a house of unripe figs.

That name is even more meaningful because of what the disciples learned at Bethany. Near Bethany Jesus went to eat a fig and found that though the tree was full of leaves, there was no fig. Disappointed, he cursed the tree. "May you never bear fruit," he said. The next day the disciples found it withered. They couldn't believe their eyes.

"Have faith in God," Jesus answered. "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him" (Mark 11:22-23, NIV).

No human fig is ripened until he or she understands what faith in God can do. Bethany was an eye-opening place of encounter. Seekers and learners discovered at

Bethany that their personal potential is way beyond their experience, dreams and belief in what is possible. That potential can only be unleashed through faith.

For 11 years I walked on land that was increasingly deserted. Ghost towns are forming in rural America as the family farm disappears. Any of you grow up on a farm? Fewer and fewer people can answer that question the way most Americans once answered it. I can't tell you how many farms and businesses closed while I was in Tracy, I only know what is our greatest hope. It isn't Washington.

Years ago, God led a black Christian man named George Washington Carver to save southern farmers from economic collapse. Those farmers were all growing cotton, and their overproduction made it worthless. Carver advised them to start producing peanuts. There was one problem. There was no market for peanuts. In fact, a large crop of peanuts was planted before any use was found. Carver spent an entire night walking through the woods and talking to his heavenly Father about the peanut. When he returned to his lab that morning, he immediately began finding different uses, like peanut butter and so on, 300 in all. In a congressional hearing he was asked how he came to know so much about the peanut. In his testimony he told them that God made the peanut and so he asked God, "What for?"

Faith unleashed Carver's potential and formed his destiny. In addition, his question, "What for?" is important. We need to ask God, "Why did you make us? Why did you bring us together? Why do we carry this name? What are we for?"

We honor God when we honor His work in us and among us. We honor God when we realize we are not by chance, nor is our name by chance. This congregation is named for a setting of life-changing encounters! At Bethany Jesus blessed people. At Bethany Jesus ascended as Lord of heaven and earth. At Bethany Jesus was first worshiped for who he truly is. At Bethany no one left these encounters the same. No one left the same.

A name is like a mustard seed. It may be a small thing, a mere detail; but it is pregnant with destiny. God is the God of mustard seeds. Do you believe that? God is the God of new beginnings, small starts and great destinies. Do you believe that?

When this congregation was formed, the founder felt convicted to emphasize the name Bethany, not its relationship with the denomination. This was a home for all unripe figs. This was a place of restoration and refreshment for any seeker, no matter how broken, any believer no matter where they came from. The slogan was “Come to Bethany. You’re welcome, wanted and needed.” God called this people to embrace that name. However, our destiny lies not only in our name, but also in our faith and in our actual encounter with the ascended Lord.

Maybe you don’t like your name. One man despised his name. I didn’t even use it at his funeral. When he was named Adolph, Hitler was unknown. He took his identity in a new name. Much like Abraham, Israel, Peter and Paul, he lived in that new identity. Similarly, God has for each of us a new name. At minimum, he calls us saints. That’s your identity and destiny if you believe. Will you believe? Do you see God’s hand in

your name? Can you see the blessing, calling and future of Bethany? We have a distinct identity and an awesome destiny. Embrace it!