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*What's in a name?* My great-grandfather is known for intercessory prayer. We are not quite sure how this all began, but it is quite common for my great grandfather to receive several phone calls a day from all over the county asking him to pray for the sick. It seems there have even been some miracles associated with his prayers. One evening while visiting my great-grandfather he was interrupted by a phone call asking for prayer, and he began to pray for the person immediately on the phone and then promised them that he would continue to pray for them. Now my family is aware that he receives many of these calls throughout the day, and so I began to wonder how he kept up with them all, and so I asked him, *Granddad do you keep a list of the names of all the prayer requests you have received?* And I will never forget his response, *no I do not keep a list, I simply pray and remember them and their needs as best I can, all that matters is that I know Jesus' name, and He knows their names and their needs, and He knows my name.*

On this Sunday, 'Passion Sunday,' the Epistle and Gospel pay special attention to Jesus's use of the Name of God. 'Passion Sunday' refers to the revelation of Jesus as God and His passion for us and for our salvation, the passion that led Him to embrace the cross of Calvary. It is not romantic passion but the bitter passion of endurance, of going through, and putting up with suffering, for our salvation and healing. The Church has deemed this topic so important that today begins the small season of the Church called Passiontide that will take us through next Sunday and then on to the following Friday, Good Friday. To help drive the message home the Church veils images of Jesus, angels and saints and omits the Gloria and the "Glory be" from our worship until Easter Sunday. We do these things to help us better focus on what Passiontide is all about, Jesus' suffering, how *for us men and for our salvation... (he) was crucified, ..under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried.*

Jesus' suffering was not an abstract matter. He is God and man, had healed the sick and raised the dead, and yet He truly felt the scourging, the nails, the splintered wood of the cross, and the pains of death. He was wholly innocent, and yet He suffered because, in the eyes of the Pharisees, He committed what was a capital crime under Jewish law. He suffered because the Jews were able to convince the Roman occupying government to do what they themselves were not allowed to do, to execute capital punishment upon Jesus as retribution for His crime. This morning's gospel provides the evidence of the crime of blasphemy. Jesus uttered the personal name of God, *I Am*, which was against the law, and he applied God's name to himself, which compounded the offense. Make no mistake, by using God's Name and applying it to Himself Jesus is telling the crowd that He is God.

To better understand the power of what's in a name, especially the name that Jesus has used in this morning's Gospel, we must look back to the Garden of Eden and Mount Horeb. In the garden, God allowed Adam to name every creature in the Garden and we discover that God places a great emphasis on the names of things. By allowing Adam to name everything in the garden, God shows he has given Adam the power to rule over creation. The power to name is the power to rule. To know a name is to exercise a measure of control. Mount Horeb was where Moses was tending sheep during his exile from Egypt before the Exodus. In looking for a lamb that had gone astray Moses finds the burning bush, and God spoke to him from the bush which

burned but did not burn up. God told Moses that he was the God of Israel's forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He wanted Moses to be the means of his rescuing Israel from their slavery to Pharaoh and leading them to the Promised Land. Moses was in no hurry to do all that, so he tried to stall God off by saying, *The people of Israel will ask me your name. What do you want me to say?* God replied, *I AM THAT I AM, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel; 'I AM hath sent me unto you.* God's personal name is translated *I am*. In Hebrew this name sounds more like breathing, but is transliterated into *Yahweh*, or, more popularly but less likely, *Jehovah*. The name tells us that God's basic nature is that He is, life itself, pure existence. His name tells us who He is, that He exists, He was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. *I am that I am*.

This is why the crowd in this morning's Gospel is so provoked by Jesus saying, *your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.* Abraham had lived about as long before Jesus as Jesus lived on earth before us. So the Jews say, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus replies, *verily, verily*, that means truthfully, truthfully, *Before Abraham was, I Am*. And at hearing Him apply the unutterable Name of God to Himself, the Jews pick up stones to throw at him to punish him for this capital blasphemy, but Jesus gets away. The evidence that Jesus said God's name and then applied it to himself supports the charge of blasphemy we will hear during Holy Week. Some time later he goes even farther, saying publicly to the Jews, *I and my Father are one*, and privately to his disciples, *He who has seen me has seen the Father*.

This morning's Gospel reveals the specific grounds on which the Jews convicted Jesus. He broke the law against uttering the divine name, and he boasted of a characteristic which belongs only to God: living forever, having been alive long enough to know Abraham. As a member of the crowd yelled at him, *You are only a man, but you are trying to make yourself God*. However, we know that the claims the Pharisees found blasphemous are, in fact, true, Jesus is God. He knows Abraham. He is one with the Father. He is the way the Father shows himself to us. The Christian religion hangs upon the idea that Jesus is God who has become a human being to reconcile God to man and man to God in His own body. Jesus accomplishes the reconciliation in his passion, by dying a tortuous death on the cross. For in his death is our life, and in His Name is Life forevermore.

Jesus accomplishes our salvation, healing us spiritually and physically from the effects of sin, and opens up to us the gates of heaven. St. Paul would have us know that there is no greater high priest than Jesus Christ the true mediator of God and man. And as a mediator He has given us the Name of God to call upon, the Holy and life giving Name of Jesus. The Name which is the herald of salvation, which brings healing, that dispels all the forces of darkness. Even if we cannot pray beautiful and sophisticated prayers, all that matters is that we pray and know the Name of Jesus, for He knows all our needs, and He knows our names too. Amen.