

# Name-calling

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Laytham's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

We

typically think of name-calling as trash talk, violent speech, all harm and no good. Often it is. In the aftermath of the midterm elections, I'm well past my quota of derogation and defamation.

But not all name-calling is violence. Our story begins not with Cain's refusal to name truly his brother Abel but with Adam--the earth creature, the *terra animate*, the human from humus--naming the animals. That story in Genesis 2 ends not with insult and injury but with exultation through naming, with verbal embrace culminating in one-flesh union. Clearly name-calling can be blessing rather than bane.

Which brings us to this week's lessons. John's query from prison is, "Should we be calling you Messiah, or is that name reserved for another?" Jesus' answer: Call it like you see it.

Messiah's

praxis and messiah's title correspond perfectly. That doesn't mean that Jesus becomes messiah by doing these things, that his praxis produces his identity. Matthew won't let us be confused on that score. Matthew introduces this account by saying, "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing," not "When John heard what Jesus was doing." The Baptist sends word to the Messiah, and the Messiah confirms that his compassionate activity is messianic

work. In my [magazine reflection](#) on these lections, I discuss Isaiah's naming Jesus "the holy way."

The Magnificat is a perfect instance of name-calling. Mary sings that "from now on all generations will call me blessed." But this isn't first a story about what we call Mary. It is first about what God's messenger calls her: "favored one." That's a naming that claims, enlivens and empowers. Mary is named as one whom God has already graced; this naming itself is empowering gift, impetus to trust, to consent, to obey and to sing.

God's name-calling elicits Mary's. She "magnifies the Lord," "rejoices in God my Savior" and sings that "holy is [God's] name." In the same way, God's naming us in baptism is a claiming that empowers us to sing in Eucharistic response: "Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ."

James is the biblical writer who has the most to say about the power of human speech to curse, cut, condemn and contemn or to bless, build up and bind together. Three times in four verses James calls us "beloved" (vss. 7, 9, 10). If we overlook this name-calling, then James is just bossy: "be patient," "don't grumble," do this, don't do that. We have names for busybodies like James. But James is not a moralist urging us to clean up our act; he's a gospeler proclaiming repeatedly that we are the Lord's beloved, beloved, beloved.