

Bearing Bad News: a sermon on 1 Samuel 3:1-20

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There's power in a name.

I had heard of Cindy Jarvis. Heck, I'd quoted her writing in papers in seminary. So I knew something of the thoughtfulness of this congregation —of your ability to wrap your heads around tough passages of scripture and deep theological discourse before I met you. What I didn't know was your heart. Six years ago, I first stepped into this sanctuary. David Nation greeted my family and helped us to find a seat. Looking back I realize he was helping us to avoid the landmine of sitting in the seats you'd claimed. When the time for the children's moment arrived, Barb Olson made sure my kids knew where to go—and then helped me to find them again in church school after worship. Dolores Edwards commented on how well behaved our children had been, which is funny to me now because of course, our spunkiest child, Ruby, had not yet been born. Brad and Lindsey Pennington were at that time a hip couple with no kids, and they filled us in on all things PCCH during coffee hour. None of them had any idea that my family had come to worship in stealth mode, trying to get an idea of whether I would soon accept your offer to serve here as an associate minister for Christian Education. Nonetheless, the welcome was so warm that I did accept your offer and returned a month later to be introduced as an addition to your staff. That Sunday, my family and I sat in a different spot in the sanctuary. The congregation had received a letter that Cindy had written that made me sound much better than I actually was. And even though Cindy had used feminine pronouns throughout the letter and had referred to my being a mother to Emilyanne and Micah, the conversation in the pew behind us before worship began went like this: "I'm so glad our new associate is a man with kids." "Me, too." I'm sure I turned a thousand shades of red. I shot a look of horror to Mark who was trying not to laugh. I will say that he rather enjoyed the audible gasp behind us when I stood to be introduced to the congregation.

There's power in a name. In this case, my name being one that typically belongs to a man had outweighed all the details in the letter. And of course, it wasn't the first time I'd surprised people when I showed up in a body they weren't expecting. I was initially placed in the boys' dormitory when I went to Governor's School. I'd done interviews with churches only to come to realize that they'd thought they were going to be interviewing a man.

So, of course I was intrigued when I heard of another female Austin— Austin Channing Brown, and her recently released book, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*. In the first chapter of her book, she talks about being mistaken for a boy on every first day of school and in every doctor's office waiting room. I can relate! But then she also tells a story of being questioned by a library clerk who all but accused her of stealing a public library card because her name didn't match the library clerk's picture of what an Austin should look like. After this encounter, Austin Channing Brown found her mother in another section of the library and demanded to know why her parents had chosen such a name for their daughter. Brown learned that her name was given to her to honor her grandmother whose maiden name had been Austin. But her mother also explained that the decision to name her daughter Austin had been more complicated than that. Brown had been named Austin because her parents knew that when she grew up and applied for jobs, potential employers would assume she was a white man rather than a black woman. In telling her young daughter this story, Austin Channing Brown's mother had become the bearer bad news, the teller of a hard truth: that if her daughter had been given another name, a name typically associated with women or with people of color, her chances of landing a competitive job interview would plummet.

There's power in a name. Today's Old Testament Reading brings to light the power of a name. Remember with me that Samuel was the long prayed-for child of Hannah, the once-childless woman who out of desperation, wept in the temple, praying that God would give her a child, and promising that if God would grant her plea, she would dedicate her child to God's service.

According to the story, God has compassion on Hannah and hears her prayer. In due time, the child is born, and he is named Samuel, which means "One who hears God." In Hebrew as in English, the word for hear or listen can also carry the connotation for obey. When we say "Listen to me" to our children, we often also mean, "Do what I say." So it is that the name given to Hannah's long-prayed-for child is "One who hears and obeys God." Which is interesting because in today's story, Samuel hears God calling his name, and eventually, with the priest Eli's guidance, responds to that call with obedience.

But not before being scared out of his mind about God's command to bear bad news, to tell a hard truth: God tells Samuel to relay a message to Eli, a message Eli will not be pleased to hear. Samuel lies awake the rest of the night, tossing and turning, perhaps hoping for a way out of telling Eli that Eli's own sons have acted wickedly and will never become God's priests or messengers.

There's power in a name. I don't care what your political stripes are, words matter. And how we treat vulnerable people matters. If you think God has called you and claimed you in the waters of baptism—and that God has invited you to feast at the communion table of God's never-ending love, but you also think that it's ok to think of certain people groups as animals—or if you also think it's ok to separate babies and toddlers and children from their parents at the border, even when those families are seeking asylum from some of the most dangerous and life-threatening situations in the world, then I have a hard truth that has kept me up all night, some bad news that left me tossing and turning and wishing I could get out of saying it: if we truly believe that God loves *us*, but we do not believe that God's loves everyone else, too, then friends, we're doing it wrong. We've got Christianity backwards. And lest we are too quick to exonerate ourselves if we ourselves would never call people animals... or if we are quick to count ourselves righteous because we are protesting our government's practice of separating babies from their nursing mothers at the border crossing, remember, it's no better to think that God doesn't love the people who refuse to love all of God's children.

Do you know what absolutely blows my mind and breaks my heart and gives me profound hope? After telling the story of learning how she received her name, and after telling story after story after story after story of encountering exhausting and dangerous racism, do you know what Austin Channing Brown says? She says this:

“And even though the Church I love has been the oppressor as often as it has been the champion of the oppressed, I can't let go of my belief in Church—in a universal body of belonging, in a community that reaches toward love in a world so often filled with hate. I continue to be drawn toward the collective participation of seeking good, even when that means critiquing the institution I love.” In the midst of so much bad news, Austin Channing Brown is listening for God and telling hard truths.

In the midst of so much bad news, there is good news, too; there is hope because the truth of the gospel is this: God is calling your name. God is calling the name of this community of believers, the people who are The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. God is calling our names to lift up the names—*the names* and *the dignity* of every other child of God.

I pray we will listen. I pray we will obey the God who is calling us. I pray we will have the courage to tell hard truths, not only to others, but also to ourselves, and in so doing, bear love into a world that is aching from the weight of bad news.

There's power in a name. So these words are offered in the most powerful name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.