

The Name

If I were a poet prone to capturing the movement and meaning of multiple months into a single word, I know which word I would pick for my first year here at Union-PSCE: Listen. It is both an imperative--what I knew I must do--and an indicative--what I spent the year in fact doing. Here at what is almost the end of my second year, I know now what my word would be: Fear. Perhaps, I have wondered, I am afraid of everything I keep hearing. As in,...Budget crisis. Budget crisis. Budget crisis. I have from time to time considered whether, if I just stopped listening, I would stop fearing. There are times when I feel the way I did when I was a little boy in the middle of the night. I would wake up when everyone else was still asleep. And in that vast, overwhelming quiet, I would hear an unusual sound. And then, I would start listening, listening so hard that my ears hurt. When you're listening that hard, you not only hear sounds, you manufacture sounds and then you convince yourself that those made up knocks actually happened outside of your head rather than inside your head. I know I'm not alone in that. I have awakened many a night to my wife sitting up in bed, asking, "did you hear that? Did you hear that?" Your mind is operating with your baser instincts and you're creating sounds that do not exist. In times like that, plagued by darkness, like the words sun and light, the words listen and fear seem to go naturally together. But I know that those two words do not co-operate in such a way. I also know that I do not fear what I hear. I fear what I know must sometimes be done in response to what I hear. And what I hear right now, rising in both levels of volume and anticipation, is the call for a new name for our seminary. I fear that the name the strategic planning committee will recommend will provoke anger, or consternation, or befuddlement, or, indeed...fear.

It is an odd place to find myself, I think. For in the midst of this severe economic downturn, we have reasonable things to fear. There are the cuts of almost 2.7 million dollars out of a budget in a single year. There is one conversation after another with a shell shocked faculty, staff and student body who must hear me tell them that we must yet again cut program, property, or people. There is this debilitating, enduring, almost demonic budget gap

that, like some mythic beast grows two heads for every one we cut out of it. It seems reasonable to me to fear such a force and to act with prudence and care in its voracious presence. What seems less reasonable is the fear that also accompanies what should be a telling of good news, of celebratory, hopeful news. After all, a new name is **good** news. When you go to the hospital and your wife or son or daughter tells you, his name is George, or her name is Alice; it's **good** news. Even if his name is Goober, it's all good. It's good news.

No one in his or her right mind fears GOOD news. And yet, I must admit that when I have thought of sharing the name of a seminary with trustees, with faculty, with students, with alums, with the world, the most overriding emotion, I confess, has been fear. All my life I have learned more and more about faith. These past 10 months, preoccupied with matters of budget and name, I have learned a lot about fear.

Concentrated in such small moments of time, fear can be a paralyzing, disorienting force. So it was with three women who, two thousand years ago, fumbled their way to the tomb of an executed man to anoint an already buried corpse. They found emptiness, and, oddly occupying the emptiness, a mysterious stranger whose first words were, "Do not be afraid." The mysterious stranger commissioned the women to go tell the disciples of the executed man that the execution didn't stick, that the man had been released from death and reinstated to life, and that he was on his way to the place where he had started his journey with them: Galilee. There, he would reconnect with his followers and reengage his mission. All the women had to do to make this happen was go find his followers and deliver this GOOD news. But instead of running after his followers, the women ran in what was apparently an opposite direction. Because they were afraid. I have found myself a kindred spirit to these women on several occasions over the past year. They listen. And then, they fear. The difference is, they also have the option of running away. I'm pretty certain the president's executive staff would fan out and find me.

Why, given this wondrous opportunity by this wondrous figure, do these women fear?

There are those who argue that this was a reasonable, reverent, righteous fear, the kind of awe that is due a confrontation with the divine. They ran off into the wilderness, prayed an appropriate prayer, and then ran into Galilee to do their work. No, by describing the

women's flight with the same verb (*phobeomai*) used to characterize the behavior of the male disciples and the mysterious young male follower who fled away naked (14:50-52), Mark lowers the women to their same, shameful level.¹ Indeed, as Andrew Lincoln points out, Mark likens the women's fear to the same dread that has distastefully marked the behavior of the male disciples throughout the narrative.²

Now that we have dismissed the reverent awe in the face of epiphany answer, we are pushed in search of more fertile ground. We find it in Galilee. As Lincoln points out, the fear Mark has described here in 16:8 has been characterized as a negative trait.³ That is, he has described it negatively in the context of the Jesus ministry that spans most of its time and energy in Galilee. In particular, the disciples' fear is structurally connected with Jesus' representation of the Reign of God in Galilee. Of course, the reader knows (and by the seventh indication of that fear, 10:32, so do the disciples) that because of the kind of ministry Jesus undertakes there, a boundary breaking one, Galilee leads inevitably (cf., 8:31, *dei*) to Jerusalem.

Throughout that Galilee ministry and on up into Jerusalem, the male disciples, and particularly the twelve, have been the ones, on the surface of the story narrative, who have been invited to follow in Jesus' boundary-breaking wake. They are the ones explicitly called in chapters one and two. They are the ones who are taught by Jesus to perform the same Kingdom acts of exorcism, miracle, and authoritative teaching that characterize his own preaching ministry.⁴ Though the women have been implied disciples, we have not yet seen them singled out as boundary-breakers on the narrative surface. Here, at 16:8, they, too, are drawn directly in. They are invited through this call back into Galilee to reignite a fire the

1. Charles J. Reedy, "Mk. 8:31–11:10 and the Gospel Ending: A Redaction Study," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972): 229.

2. Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Promise And The Failure: Mark 16:7,8," *JBL* 108, no. 2 (1989): 286–7. After tracking Mark's use of the verb for fear in 16:8 (*phobeomai*), he draws the following conclusion: "So, of the other twelve references to fear in the narrative, only one can be judged to be part of a positive response (5:33) and then it belongs to the set phrase "fear and trembling"; one is ambiguous (6:20); and ten, including all the references to the disciples, have negative connotations." (287). Driggers, finding negativity implicit even in 5:33, is even more forceful. "Instead, we are left with a fear that Mark consistently contrasts with faith, a fear hardly worthy of emulation, a fear that--by virtue of the causal *gavr*--renders the women silent." I. Brent Driggers, "At the Mercy of Mark's God: Reader Exclusion in Mark 16:8," conference presentation (Mid-Atlantic Region of Society of Biblical Literature; Baltimore, 2002), 9.

3. 4:41; 5:15, 33, 36; 6:20, 50; 9:32; 10:32; 11:18, 32; 12:12; 16:8.

4. Cf., 3:13-19; 6:7-13, 30.

cross in Jerusalem was supposed to have extinguished. They were to be accomplices no more; the angel solicits them to take their place narrative front and center as perpetrators of the good news. *Their* actions will recycle the dangerous ministry that represents the Reign of God and thereby make them as identifiable with that Reign as their male counterparts already had been. *That* is why they are afraid and *that* is why, like their male counterparts, they take off.

In the midst of all this, while most readers are scrambling around to determine the location of the good news in a gospel where so many bad things are happening, the women are on the run because, even though they have been a part of the story all along, it is only now that they finally understand it. *They are afraid of the good news.* Going to the disciples and then going on to Galilee would start them inevitably on Jesus' good news kind of way. Like Jesus, they would initiate and then become the very boundary breaking they declared. They would become boundary breakers for others in the way that Jesus had been for them. There is a cost for that. That is what Galilee means. It is not the angel that they fear; they fear his message and what it means for their lives. They fear the good news.

Listen, it is right to fear the change from an old name to a new name. Because names matter. Even if it is good news that you're moving away from an inelegant name that seems to take as long to say as one of the institution's degree programs takes to complete, there is an appropriate fear associated with changing it. No matter how we acknowledge that Union-PSCE is more treaty than name, it has been our treaty and has kept our peace for nearly a decade, so there is an appropriate fear associated with changing it. No matter that a person reading Union-PSCE on a road sign has absolutely no clue what in the world a Union-PSCE is, the good news that the community has mustered the courage to change that name attaches to itself an appropriate fear. Because good news like this, good news that promises change in the way we identify ourselves and the way we represent ourselves to the world is also costly news. The only people who truly like change I have heard our Professor Ken McFayden say are babies with wet diapers. Like the women at the empty tomb, everyone else at some level fears it because they fear the cost change will inevitably bring with it.

Names and name changes are incredibly, almost painfully important in the biblical narratives. When Jacob becomes Israel a phenomenal shift at some almost primordial level

has taken place. This is a man who like his people now wrestles with God. When Simon becomes Peter, this man is transformed into the hope of what he can be: not rocky soil which provides insufficient sustenance for the sower's seeds to live, but a stable rock upon which a church can be built. When Saul becomes Paul, neither the sound nor the spelling changes are dramatic, but in this very subtle shift, we have an astounding new creation.

A name remembers the past, but it also foresees the future. There is eschatology in a name. In it, one can not only find a connection to a people's history, one catches a glimpse of their new day, not only what they will be called, but how they will be perceived, not only what they will brand, but how they will live. A name, like the biblical names, at its best, does all of this. It is not a treaty; it is a promise. Israel promises to keep wrestling with God, and it does. Simon covenants to remain rock even when the ground beneath him shifts and he temporarily loses his way, and he does. Paul proposes to turn people from past lives of idol worship to a future filled with the unsettling specter of a living, gracious God, and he does. No wonder the taking hold of a new name is a fearful thing. Even if it isn't a dramatic change from the old name, it portends something about the future that is different from the past. Not a treaty, but a promise. And promises, because of what they promise, because they threaten to fail as much as they dare to succeed, because they imply change in a world that takes to change uneasily, promises are dangerous things. That's why when I got the word to go and tell my Union-PSCE followers that we have some suggestions for a new name, like the women at the tomb, my first reaction was one of fear. I fear offering too little and promising too much--at the same time.

And so I offer Union. Listen, I know it is already a part of our name. That is why it is important. Because it is not just a part of our name, it is a part of us. Our history and our heritage. For almost 200 years now. There is something about the living, breathing, working, teaching, studying, preparing, preaching, transforming of 200 years that ought not to be let go. In Samuel B. Wilson's history of the seminary, written in 1867, he notes that the name Union was specifically formulated in 1828 to recognize the decision of the Synods of

Virginia and North Carolina to join together in support of the Seminary.⁵ If that dating is correct, that means that the seminary existed from 1812 to 1828 as something else, or at least with some other name, or perhaps no name. In 1828, somebody somewhere manufactured the thought that very soon afterwards spread across the region as GOOD NEWS: two Synods had united in their support of the work of the seminary on the campus of Hampden Sydney. Those who listened to that good news were responsible for naming that seminary Union. Union, then, never was a static word, a noun that sits still while the verbs swirl in grammatical activity all around it. From the very beginning, it, too, has been an action verb, a designation of a coming together, an operating in concert, a pulling in concert, a gathering of mind, resources, energies, and prayers to create something--not only a name but a movement. While the resources of the northern church were gathering like wind behind the sails of that seminary in Princeton, those entrusted with preparing leaders in and for the southern church were uniting in their efforts for theological education. Union not only described what they created, Union described how they went about creating it.

If a name is more than just a static entity, if it carries with it an eschatology, a vision of a community's future, if a name is more than a treaty, but also a promise, then Union says as much about who we will be as it says about who we once were. It reminds us not only of a union in the past, but portends a union in the future. If we are to live into the legacy established for us, the name cannot be a mere celebration of what was, it must also be a call to action for what can be. What we can be.

It is because of the promises that the name Union still carries that I believe Union is still the name that must be a signal part of our name. It is not the static Union that federated with PSCE that I am speaking of. It is not the Union that is now one half of Union-PSCE. It is the Union of the vision and energy and faith and love of the Presbyterians who gathered as the Synods of North Carolina and Virginia when it took more than one leader, more than one church, more than one Presbytery, more than one Synod to pull off a place where the leaders of the whole church could be trained in and for the southern church. That Union is not just about the past, because its past bears promise for our future.

5. I want to express my thanks to Reference Librarian Paula Skreslet and Professor Stanley Skreslet for

What does Union promise?

Union is the promise of the Virginia and North Carolina synods living itself out in a new way. Perhaps it is God's sense of humor that Richmond and Charlotte have found themselves in sometimes testy competition for bragging rights as southern cities, but that in those two cities are found the resources that continue a Union of faith and work to maintain the ministry of theological education in this region. Union is the promise of Richmond and Charlotte overcoming the view that the mother ship in Richmond must not be burdened with the demands of the satellite in Charlotte. Union is the promise that Charlotte need not continue to believe that it must raise its funds separately for its own operation as though the one school had two financial ledgers. Union is the promise that in two cities we can indeed have a single seminary. It is a promise fraught with difficulties, imperiled by faculty, donor, staff, trustee, and, yes, sometimes even presidential fear, but it is a promise nonetheless. To a church in desperate need of creative, vital, vibrant leadership, the promise of this Union is GOOD News.

Union is the promise of three educational platforms: Richmond, Charlotte, and the Extended Campus Program: three ways of delivering theological education in a world that demands diversity in its methodology as much as it demands diversity in its faculty, staff, and student bodies. Union is the one PCUSA seminary that can promise the weaving together of a residential program, a commuter program, and an online/hybrid program into a single curriculum for a single school for a church desperate to find new ways to train its leaders. This is because Union is not just who we are; Union is what we do.

Union is the promise of classroom and technology woven into a transforming curriculum. Some students fear it. Some staff fear it. Many faculty fear it. But we are growing ever deeper into a 21st century world where men and women are tweeting from space, where the fastest growing category on internet social networking sites like Facebook are middle aged women, where the world is flattening out because of almost miraculous technological advances in communications and travel, where people living in China can be in constant communication with people in Richmond, Virginia, where a man can stand in a classroom on the East Coast and teach pastors hungry for knowledge in Praetoria, South Africa.

pointing me to this reference.

Whether we fear it or not, whether we resist it or not, technology is transfiguring our world. With the advances built into our seminary in facilities like the Early Center, in the learning that happens as we experiment with online teaching and video conferencing between Richmond and Charlotte, we prepare ourselves for this new day and this new world by living out this particular promise of Union.

Union is the promise of something more than the sum of its previous parts: Union Theological Seminary and the Presbyterian School of Christian Education. I realize that there is great fear that PSCE will be swallowed up and erased if the name of the seminary has Union in it but not PSCE. I am an outsider to this fight and I confess that though I fear it, I do somewhat understand it. Having grown up a minority in a world that has often been hostile to persons of my kind and color, I understand what it means to fear loss of identity. I also became a Presbyterian at the time when there was talk of re-union in the Presbyterian church. I was a member of Southern Virginia Presbytery, a former UP Presbytery, whose 22 churches spanned the state of Virginia, where there existed 4 former PCUS Presbyteries. There were many in our predominately black and tiny Presbytery who feared reunion because it threatened to dilute the presence, power and voice of black Presbyterians. The debate over our Presbytery's vote was a heated one. In what was one of my very first Presbytery meetings, in my youthful passion and disregard for common sense, I argued that we would disappear only if we wanted to disappear. I could not believe that a people who had lived through slavery without disappearing, had fought segregation without disappearing, had helped to build one of the most impressive Civil Rights movements in history from the scratch in political invisibility, could disappear in the reunion of the Presbyterian church unless they wanted to do so, unless they limped off and sat sulking on the sideline of ecclesiastical transformation and waited for someone to invite them where they already rightfully belonged. I believe the same argument does and must hold for PSCE. Union promises not to let PSCE disappear because Union is both Union Theological and PSCE. Those who have fought and continue to fight for all that PSCE was and is will and must continue to do so through a legacy that is stronger than any name because the name is built upon the legacy. That legacy of Christian Education is one whose voice must not be lost and will not be lost unless we give up on it, and somehow I don't think

that will ever happen. Union will always promise a Union of Theological and Christian Education, and that promise will be reality if we determine together that we will not let it go. Union represents GOOD news for both the old Union Theological Seminary and the old Presbyterian School of Christian Education. I understand why some of us fear that good news. I hope all of us will respond to that fear with courage and conviction to ensure that all that Union unites in promise will continue to live in educational and theological reality.

Union is and I think always will be Presbyterian. It is not insignificant that the name recommended by the Strategic Planning Committee, Union Presbyterian, is composed of the first two words of the two key sections of our current name.

There are many excellent arguments why the word Presbyterian should not be a part of this name. The word looks to the past in a world whose future appears more and more likely to be non denominational. Presbyterian, as a brand, and as a church is, I fear, dying. Perhaps the cutbacks and enduring staff layoffs at Presbyterian central in Louisville is a metaphor for the entire church, shrinking away before our eyes.

Maybe, just maybe, as one friend noted, the Presbyterian church is shrinking to significance. Perhaps that is the GOOD News in that otherwise dreary scenario. Only time, and the people who stay in the shrink, will tell. The people who stay will determine how significant what is left will be. In naming ourselves, we have a chance to position ourselves inside the shrink or outside it. We have the opportunity to fight. By the way we name ourselves, we have the opportunity to become the good news we profess: that there really is life in the midst of dying.

In my first interview as president of the seminary, I was asked what I thought one of the key roles might be for the seminary. I answered that I thought a seminary could be a catalyst for the revitalization of the church. I still think that. More and more, though, I have become particular in my thinking. Perhaps the Presbyterian seminaries, perhaps this Presbyterian seminary, ought to be a catalyst for the revitalization of THIS Presbyterian church.

How so? By teaching by our work and by our life and by the way we train people for leadership in the ministry of the church what it means to be Presbyterian. If we are as ecumenical as we have always claimed we are, here is our chance to live what we say by not

running from our name but by reinvigorating what our name stands for. By how we train church leaders who are not just Presbyterian, but mostly so, by how we call faculty who are from the broad spectrum of the church, which we already do, by sending our graduates out with the knowledge of what God is doing in the world through a Reformed lens that has always been open to and engaging of other Christian perspectives, we can teach church leaders who can teach the church and the world what it has meant, does mean, and will mean to be Presbyterian. There are many in the world who don't know. And those who do know see a church, or at least a seminary, running away from its own legacy as it apparently runs out of time. If the educational flagships of this faith armada abandon the name and therefore abandon the churches who still bear that name, then it is a time to fear for the Presbyterian church indeed. We said during the strategic planning process that we wanted to be a seminary for the church. Here is our chance. Be a seminary for the Presbyterian church! That is the church that in a transforming union gave us life. Now it is our time and turn to give some life back. Putting Presbyterian with Union gives us not just a name; it gives us a cause. And perhaps that is what we Presbyterians have been lacking so much for so long. We have issues, Lord knows, we have issues. But we have no cause. Perhaps the cause is us, telling the world about us, not giving up on us.

My daughter Kaylin is doing a school project and she's doing hers on miracles. She came to me the other day and asked me where the Red Sea story was and we turned to Exodus. She wanted to know where the fishes and loaves story was and we turned to Mark. In the end, she used neither of those. She told me in the end she chose the Lazarus story. When I asked her why, I thought she was going to say, because that is the story you used at your inauguration. She said instead, "because I am interested in how miracles make people angry because they change things. People don't like changing things, even when a miracle is involved." Then she asked me, point blank, "have you ever seen a miracle?" I confessed, "no." And she asked, "but do you believe they happen?" I confessed, "yes. And someday I'd like to see one."

I realize now that God is giving me the chance to kind of live one. I've always wanted to have Bible stuff happen to me. But the truth be told, I've only wanted the good stuff in the

Bible to happen to me. I dread the leprosy, but I covet Jesus' touch. I shudder at the blindness, but I glory in the suddenness of new sight. I tremble at the portraits of biblical poverty, but I long for the wealth of God's presence walking and talking all over my countryside. I want the miracles, but I don't want the desperate, painful, dangerous world the miracles must engage.

And that makes me think of what God can do in our world, with our name, with even Presbyterian. I think of Jeremiah in the 32nd chapter of his book, going to buy a field in Anathoth, a land under siege, destined to be destroyed. But his purchase was a sign of God's faithfulness, and a sign of his participation with God in the new thing that was going to happen to this old and dying land. His purchase was a sign to his people of his trust that God was going to bring this land and this people back.

Pairing Presbyterian with Union in the world we live in is something like that act of faith, devotion, and promise. To entertain the possibility of calling ourselves Union Presbyterian is to say to the world that God is not done here yet, that we will work with God to teach the world what it means to be Presbyterian, that we will graduate pastors who can revitalize that name and the reality it represents with love and faith. To take THIS name is to stake THAT claim, to buy into that troubled landscape. You want to see a miracle; here's our chance to make one. With a name and the way we live into it.

I know it is not a glitzy name. When I first thought of this naming process, I dreamed of a name that would make the board, faculty, staff, students and alums, when they heard it, spontaneously stand up and cheer. I'm always looking for that miracle! I recalled the Disney movie, the Lion King, and the way the hyenas talked about the great lion, the father of the movie's hero, Simba. Simba's father was named Mufasa. One of the hyenas explained, "just the sound of that name sends shivers down my spine." And he told his friend, "say it again." And his friend said, "Mufasa." And right on cue, he shivered. Well, I didn't think Mufasa Theological Seminary was going to go over all that well, so I quickly dismissed it. But I still dreamt of a name that would send shivers down the spines of all who heard it, shivers that wouldn't stop until trembling hands reached into stuffed wallets and pulled out wads of money to send the seminary's way.

Union Presbyterian isn't Mufasa Theological, but it is us. Perhaps none of the approximately 300 names the consultants came up with and dismissed or we dismissed for them worked because none of them were us. Perhaps it is appropriate that having gone all over the place seeking shelter, we find shelter at home. Perhaps Union Presbyterian best fits because Union Presbyterian is us, is all of us.

Sharon and Kaylin tell of a story of their trip to a Princeton Pizza place to get take out pizza one night when I was traveling. There was a young man for whom English was obviously not a native language manning the cash register. When they entered the store he asked for their name. They said Blount. Immediately, he turned and started to scan the labels on the waiting pizza boxes and turned to them and said, "Johnson?" Sharon said, "no, Blount." After turning to the pizza boxes again, the young man inquired, "Johnson?" At this point, Kaylin, too, chimed in and they both said, "Blount." So the young man turned again, looked studiously, and picked out a pizza, and, handing it to them in delight said, "Johnson." At which point Kaylin said, "we're not Johnson. We're Blount."

We're not Mufasa, or New Union, or Crosshill, or Grace, or Providence, or any of the other wonderful names that were considered: We are Union. People might think we are somebody else because there have been times we have probably not been so sure ourselves. Now is our chance to be sure, to tune out the would be other name options and get others and ourselves focused on one name, our name. Here is our chance not only to see something miraculous, but to be a part of something miraculous. Here is our chance to form a more perfect Union.