Grace to you and peace—from the One who is, and the One who was, and the One who is to come.

Have you ever had a nickname? How did you get your nickname? Did you like it or did it annoy you? Was it a passing thing or are you still using it? Nicknames are used all over the world. Sometimes they are terms of affection, sometimes they are sweet, sometimes they are funny and sometimes they are brutally offensive. In some cases people choose their own nickname, or an alternative name, because they simply don’t like their birth name. For example, my sister-in-law calls herself Nora, which is really her middle name, because she does not like her birth name. I have discovered that this is actually a common practice. A few times I had to visit someone in the hospital in my role as a pastor. Luckily I was told at the last moment the person’s actual name, which was a good thing. Otherwise I would have arrived at the information desk and asked for a person that was never admitted.

And then, of course, there are all the famous people with nicknames. Frank Sinatra was known as ‘Ol’ Blue Eyes.’ Mae West was called “Peaches.” President Benjamin Harrison was known as “Kid Gloves.” (He was prone to skin infection and wore kid gloves to protect his hands.) George Herman Ruth was known to millions of baseball fans as “The Babe” or “Babe Ruth.” Earvin Johnson, the retired basketball player, is forever known as “Magic Johnson.” Annie Oakley was known as “Little Miss Sure Shot.” The 19th Century gunman William Henry McCarty was known as “Billy the Kid.” And then there is Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, who most people know better by her stage name, “Lady Gaga.”

Whether the names are given or self-chosen, whether they are sweet or clever, whether they are used for endearment or for self-promotion, nicknames tend to stick when they somehow match with the bearer of the name. But look, here in today’s Gospel Jesus is giving Simon a nickname which seems to have nothing at all to do with him. Jesus says, “Simon, Son of Jonah, your name from now on is Rock!” Rock? Of all the names that might have ever been picked for Simon, Rock seems the least likely. Rock is a good name for someone who is solid and steadfast, someone who is grounded balanced, consistent and reliable.

But Simon was none of these. Simon was passionate and impulsive, he was rash and impetuous, he leaped before he looked, he spoke before he considered his words, and he made promises which he could not keep. At one moment he promised fervently, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go, I will lay down my life for you.” But then, when Jesus was arrested, Simon was so afraid he denied Jesus three times! Then he ran away. These are not the actions of a Rock. These are the actions of a leaf, trembling and turning in the wind.

But then, after the crucifixion there was the resurrection, and with the resurrection a new beginning. A community of faith was born, and the center and bedrock of this new community was none other than Simon. And slowly Simon grew into the name which Jesus had given him. He did become the Rock, or “Petros” in the language of the first Christians, or “Peter” in our own English language. And ever since, Christianity has known Simon by his new name, Peter.
Peter the Apostle was still as hot-headed as in his previous life when he was Simon the fisherman. He had some serious fights with the apostle Paul, for example. But alongside the old hot-temperedness something new emerged, a new strength and ability to lead. Did Simon change because of his new name, or had Jesus seen beyond the surface and detected these potential qualities and called them forth? Perhaps it was a little bit of both. We know that bad names and slurs and teasing can hurt and even kill. But the opposite is true as well. Good regard and a good name can heal and raise a person up.

In one of my congregations there was a gay man who had not been treated very well growing up. As a result he often struggled with low self-esteem. But one day he came to me and said, “In this church everyone is treating me with such respect, so I have decided that I now must treat myself with respect as well.” I would like to hear such stories much more often. I know that this has happened for many in this room, but not for everyone.

We cannot rest, ever, until everyone who comes through these doors, everyone who kneels at this altar, everyone who shares coffee at our tables, knows that they have a special name. No matter what other names we have been given, no matter what other names we have been called, there is one name that is our birthright, and that is “Child of God.” “Child of God, beloved beyond comprehension.” This name is something which we should be able to whisper to ourselves each morning when we get up and each night when we go to sleep. If anyone ever leaves here without feeling this love, without this assurance, we have not done our job.

And so I have to tell you about the other name we all have been given and that is “witness.” “You shall be my witnesses,” Jesus said. We are meant to bear witness of God’s grace and God’s love to everyone we meet. So, here are two names for you. The first one is “You are a child of God, beloved beyond comprehension.” The second one is, “You are a witness, a witness to God’s immense love and grace.” And the third name is a name for you to discover.

I feel like I sound like the musical Cats, where all the cats have three names. The first is the name which the family uses daily, a name which is sensible or fancy or sweet. The second name is a particular and peculiar name that never belongs to more than one cat. And the third name is the secret name. Supposedly cats spend much time in deep reflection and profound contemplation of the thought (of the thought! of the thought!) of this secret name.

What do you suppose your secret name is? What kinds of hidden qualities might God want to call forth in you? And how would you grow in faith and in life if you claimed your secret name?

I would like to close with a beloved Bible verse, a verse which we often use at baptisms, from Isaiah 43:1. “But now, says the one who created you and fashioned you: ‘Do not be afraid. For I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.’”

Amen.