



ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

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Luke 1:57-68(68-80)

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"What's In a Name?"

Babies, babies, babies......everyone we know is having babies. Over the last six months Jeffrey and I have heard from at least 9 of our friends or family that they're having a baby. And of course that means baby showers, baby gifts and **baby names**.

Tuesday night as I was preparing for today, reading the text from Luke, our phone rang. It was our next door neighbors calling to get our opinion on a list of names they've picked out for their baby that's due in November. Jeffrey and I both laughed out loud when they called, simply because it was at that very moment that I had been reading this verse: *"Then the people began motioning to his father Zechariah to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed."*

It was just as I finished speaking those words that our neighbors called. Coincidence or not, it seemed a little weird. But I must tell you, in case you were wondering, the name John was not on their list. They were trying to decide what each name conveyed- strength, character, kindness. My vote was for the name Tillman- a good strong family name, Jeffrey liked the name Jackson- an old southern favorite. I guess we'll find out what they chose in November.

So what's in a name? In today's Gospel lesson we have a couple naming a baby they thought they'd never have. A miracle child! Back in verse 5 of Luke's Gospel we read that Zechariah and Elizabeth were growing very old and Elizabeth was barren. Neither of them thought they would ever have children.

But then in verse 8 the story continues with the Angel Gabriel appearing to Zechariah in the temple. Gabriel came to share the good news that Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son, even in her advanced age, and they would name him John. Zechariah was stunned and in great fear at the sight of the Angel Gabriel. And when Gabriel told Zechariah the news of the baby that would be born, Zechariah didn't want to believe the angel and so he became deaf and mute because of his disbelief.

Our lesson today picks up 9 months later, on the day of the child's birth. And of course it's time to give the baby a name. If you are a parent you know that picking the right name for your child can be difficult and sometimes people disagree with you on your choice. In your case maybe it was your spouse, your mother or mother-in-law or maybe even your next door neighbor who just didn't like the name you picked out. But for many reasons or for no reason at all really, the name felt right to you.

Being that I don't have children yet, I can't resonate with the feeling of holding your baby for the first time, gazing at its delicate face and thinking... she looks like an Elise, or he looks like a Jeffrey. But I imagine many of you do remember that moment and that feeling. I imagine most of you remember the first time you saw your baby's face, and touched their little feet, and kissed their soft cheek and heard their first cry that echoed in the delivery room. You might even remember the moment you decided what their name would be, how you felt, who you were thinking of when you named them, maybe you even dreamed of what their life would be like if they were named a particular name.

I have a feeling for Elizabeth and Zechariah that moment was much like it would be for any of us. Lots of people gathered nearby, family and friends, waiting to hear the news of the new baby and what

their name might be. A moment filled with joy and excitement, and probably a bit of exhaustion and anxiety. Once Elizabeth gave birth, her family and friends rejoiced with her in the miracle and then in effect said, "Obviously you will name the baby after his father Zechariah." Naming the child after its father was the general custom in those days. But Elizabeth quickly responded, "No! He is to be called John." And the people a bit confused and obviously unsatisfied said, "But none of your relatives are named John." So then they turned to Zechariah to find out what he wanted to name the baby and Zechariah, still unable to speak, wrote on a tablet, "His name is John."

And immediately Zechariah was able to speak again, praising God for His great works, His love and mercy, and all the people were amazed. A miracle! But the people still seemed perplexed by the name John. ***What's in the name?***

Are names really that important? Do certain people look like or act like a John or an Elizabeth, a David or a Sarah? ***What's in a name?***

My full name is Venning Elise Tyndall Stringer. Elise, a French name, means "set apart or consecrated by God." I am named after my Grandmother "Florence Elise" and my Great Aunt, "Ethel Venning." I love my name; I think it fits me very well. And it's special that I'm named after my Granny. I've always enjoyed having an unusual name, and through the years I've received many compliments on how beautiful the name Elise is. But it was often frustrating when I was younger to hear people mispronounce my name as Vining Elsie. In fact I got in a bit of a scuffle in second or third grade when one little boy insisted on calling me Elsie the cow over and over. Well, over and over until I pushed him off the monkey bars and was put on the "time out rug."

So what's in a name? Do you know what your name means? In the Bible, naming is part of the creating process. In Genesis 1, as God creates each different thing He gives it its name: "God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night'." And in Genesis 3 Adam shares with God in the creating process by giving names to all the animals.

Naming establishes a relationship, gives people and things meaning and purpose and makes communication possible. To know a name makes it possible to address or call upon someone in a personal way. "Hey you" just doesn't seem the same.

This weekend at the LCY convention in Newberry we all wore these bright yellow nametags and we played lots of games where the youth and adults got to know each other's name. It was the first thing we did when we arrived Friday afternoon. ***Nametags, name games, learning names.*** I asked some of the youth what their names meant. Cameron Smith told me her name means "flat nose," smiling as she said it. I did my best not to laugh while she shook her head, "yes, it really means flat nose." Anne Rivers Hiller wasn't sure what her name means but she told me she thinks it means "the most awesome cool person ever!" I looked it up and it means "full of grace." Elizabeth Bishop couldn't remember so I researched her name and it means "oath of God." They all became very interested in what their names mean. So I told them I would do a little research when I got home and we could talk about it later.

Throughout our weekend at the LCY Convention we talked with other youth and adults about how our lives are to be a reflection of God's love, a reflection of the name God has given us, ***"beloved child of God."*** We are called by God to live out our Baptism into Christ by being a reflection of God's love in all we say and do.

In today's lesson we learn that Elizabeth and Zechariah's child would be called John, which means, "the Lord is gracious." And we hear of the important mission that John is sent to fulfill in his lifetime. "And you child will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways."

"Your child will go before the Lord to prepare his ways." John's name revealed his mission, his ministry and his purpose. To prepare the way of the Lord Jesus Christ. To be a herald and a trumpet for our

Lord. To Baptize Jesus and to share the message of love and forgiveness that Jesus would bring into the world.

Today we continue in that mission and ministry, in that same purpose and passion as we celebrate the beginning of this year's Vacation Bible School- The Great Bible Reef. Together we will decorate rooms, share a meal of fellowship and kick off an exciting week of underwater adventure! As a family of faith at St. Michael's we are called to join in this ministry of sharing God's word with young children as we ourselves dive deep into God's word, exploring the mission and ministry He has set us apart to do.

In less than 24 hours this church will be filled with petite, energetic little people, brothers and sisters in this family of faith, members of Christ's Body in this place. Each of them will wear a tiny badge displaying the name their parents have given them, but together with teachers, volunteers, family and friends we will help them explore, discover and understand the name God has given them, the name God has given each of us—***Beloved Child of God. The children called to go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of sins.***

What's in a name? In the name, Child of God, there is strength. Strength in knowing we are never alone in the mission and ministry God has called us to through Jesus Christ our Lord. In the name, Child of God, there is power. Power in knowing that as the Body of Christ we are given the gift of Christ's unconditional love and forgiveness and are called to share it with all the world. In the name, Child of God, there is grace and mercy. Grace and mercy because we have been loved just as we are and forgiven for all we fail to be, redeemed and rescued from sin.

Names are important. Naming establishes a relationship, gives people and things meaning and purpose and makes communication possible. Just like John the Baptist, we too, each of us, have been named, claimed and called by God to go and prepare the way of the Lord. Named, claimed and called to dive deep into God's word, study it and open our hearts and minds to it. Called to teach our children God's word, called to wrap the widows, the orphans and the homeless in God's love, called to offer forgiveness, belonging and hope to all God's people, to the least, the last and the lost, and called to pray for peace for all God's creation.

Names are important. Remember, Children of God, you have been named by God our Creator, redeemed by Christ the Son and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Our name tag is the cross of Christ, and we have been marked with it forever!

So together let us go and "prepare the way of the Lord."

Thanks Be To God! Amen.