

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 12, 2025 (The Baptism of Our Lord, Year C)
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Isaiah 43:1-7

How many of you remember the old Johnny Cash song "A boy named Sue"? I love that song. It cracks me up. He sang,

My daddy left home when I was three
And he didn't leave much to ma and me
Just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze.
Now, I don't blame him cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that he ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me "Sue."

Now as the song goes, he was always picked on because of his name, so he grew up to be a fighter. He said, "I tell ya, life ain't easy for a boy named 'Sue.'"

He HATED his father for giving him that awful name. One day he found his dad in a bar and he confronted him. And his dad said,

Son, this world is rough
And if a man's gonna make it, he's gotta be tough
And I knew I wouldn't be there to help ya along.
So I give ya that name and I said goodbye
I knew you'd have to get tough or die
And it's the name that helped to make you strong.

And Sue realized that the name HAD made him tough. It shaped who he was. So at the end of the song he sings,

And I think about him, now and then,
Every time I try and every time I win,
And if I ever have a son, I think I'm gonna name him...
BILL OR GEORGE, ANYTHING BUT SUE, I STILL HATE THAT NAME!!"

The whole song is about the power of a NAME. Names HAVE POWER. They tell us who we ARE.

So GIVING a name to a child is an important DECISION for ALL parents. That name will be WITH their son or daughter for their whole life. Names distinguish our personal IDENTITY, WHO we are.

And children LOVE to hear stories of HOW their names were CHOSEN, so they can know their place in the world, and their place in their family.

For example, my boy Samuel's middle name is Harry, after his grandfather, my wife's dad, and HIS dad, AND Wendy's grandfather on her MOM'S side too.

My girl Annabelle owes SOME of her name to her aunt LeAnna. And her MIDDLE name is Betty, after BOTH MY MOM and WENDY'S GRANDMA.

Myself, I was named after my dad's best friend in the Army. That's why it's just Reggie and not Reginald. (If you don't remember me saying it before, don't call me that.) It's REGGIE, (that's what my birth certificate says) because I was named AFTER someone. Names are passed down from generation to generation.

Many of our names came from baby BOOKS, because our parents liked the MEANING of our name. ANNABELLE'S name means GRACE AND BEAUTY. It fits her.

Some of us are named after favorite characters from books or movies, or from the Bible. That's where we got the name Samuel.

Our names can say a LOT about us. But no matter WHERE your name came from, some of the most SIGNIFICANT events in our lives are moments when GOD CALLS us by name. When you were baptized, your name was announced as your sponsors presented you. At baptism and confirmation, we prayed for the gift of the Holy Spirit SPECIFICALLY for YOU. We call a husband and a wife by name in the service for marriage. People who receive prayer for HEALING hear their individual names addressed to God. Finally at death, we commend EVERY Christian to God by NAME, in the liturgies for commendation of the dying and for burial.

On THIS day, the Baptism of Our Lord, we remember the FIRST of those events—our BAPTISM. In CHRIST'S baptism, HE was given a name, “beloved son.” In OUR baptism, WE are given a name ALSO, the name that is ours for all eternity, “child of God.”

Isaiah described it well:

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by NAME, YOU ARE MINE....
You are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you.

That's GOD speaking THROUGH Isaiah there! This is remarkable, because this is the ONLY place in the WHOLE Bible where God HIMSELF speaks those words: “I love you.”

In our baptism, GOD NAMES us. Consider that for a moment – God the almighty, the creator and master of the universe, calls YOU by name, claims YOU as his own.

I keep this piece in my office. You might have heard it before.

- ✦ If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.
- ✦ If God had a wallet, your photo would be in it.
- ✦ He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning.
- ✦ Whenever you want to talk, He'll listen.
- ✦ Face it, God's CRAZY about you.

All the things the WORLD tells us we have to DO, or HAVE, or BE to have any VALUE – NONE of that matters. We ALREADY have value—in GOD'S eyes. When Jesus came to the Jordan, he hadn't DONE ANYTHING yet. His ministry didn't begin until AFTER his baptism. But God was ALREADY pleased with him. God was pleased with him for ONE reason and one reason only – the SAME reason you and I would give our LIFE for our children from the moment they're BORN, and even BEFORE – because they're OURS. The FATHER was PLEASED with Jesus SIMPLY for who he WAS.

So the words that God spoke to JESUS that day at the river Jordan, he ALSO speaks to you and me: “You are my CHILD, the Beloved; with YOU I am well pleased.” Hear that again, because those words are for YOU: “You are MY child...with YOU I am well pleased.” In baptism, you are given a name, and that name IS “child of God.”

So brothers and sisters, know this: God is PLEASED with you, and YOU ARE loved. Not because of anything you have done; but SIMPLY because YOU ARE HIS.

You have a big name to live up to. EVEN if you're ALSO a “boy named Sue.” Amen.