

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

January 9, 2022 (The Baptism of Our Lord, Year C)
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Isaiah 43:1-7

There is POWER in a NAME.

A few years back I saw a movie called Bird Box. Now, I'm not usually INTO HORROR movies, so I CAN'T recommend this movie based SOLELY on its GENRE, but I DID WATCH it, and I guess it was GOOD for a movie about the end of the world, if you LIKE that kind of thing.

I only bring it up, because there is a POWERFUL scene near the END of it. The main character, Malorie, has been raising her son and a girl who was born the same day. They're around 5 years old, but Malorie never GAVE them NAMES, because she doesn't want to get to ATTACHED to them, because she's SURE they are going to die, JUST like everyone else. She just calls them Boy and Girl. But at the end, when they FINALLY reach a place that seems safe, she DOES give them names. The girl she names Olympia, after the girl's mother, who she says, "was the sweetest girl I ever met." The boy she names Tom, after the ONLY man she EVER loved, who helped RAISE the kids. And those KIDS, when they were TOLD their names, it was more than just a LABEL. It meant EVERYTHING to them. It meant they had a MOTHER. They had a CONNECTION, an IDENTITY. The movie was WORTH all the HORROR for me, JUST to see their faces when they HEARD their names.

Names HAVE power. Even HOLLYWOOD can see THAT.

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 her 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. (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.

Some of us are named after favorite CHARACTERS from books or movies. 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.

Sometimes our names tell stories. We gave our first-born the name Samuel because of the circumstances of his birth. You see, Wendy and I had picked that name TOGETHER YEARS ago, just because we LIKED it. But you may have noticed that at 49 years old, I'm kind of old for having a 16 year old. You see, after 11 childless years, we'd given UP on that, and every OTHER name. My doctor told me that, for biological reasons, our chances of having a baby were next to NOTHING. But then the IMPOSSIBLE happened – we got pregnant. We started thinking about names AGAIN, and we quickly remembered Samuel. We wanted a BIBLICAL name with a good meaning, so we looked it up. And as it turns out, the name LITERALLY MEANS, "I asked the Lord for him," which is what Hannah, who ALSO couldn't have children, said when God gave her a son (1 Samuel 1:20). The name couldn't be more perfect, because Samuel IS a GIFT from God. It's almost as if God knew, all those years ago, how much it would mean to us now.

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.

You know, 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 – 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.

It's right there in your name: Child of God. Amen.