

January 1, 2023  
Luke 2:15-21

The Name of Jesus  
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## “He Was Called Jesus”

“After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

*“What name do you give this child?”*

I have presided at hundreds of baptisms during my ordained ministry, but one of the most memorable baptisms I have attended was one for which I was not the presiding minister. Our neighbours on Long Island invited us to the baptism of their baby at St. Agnes Cathedral in Rockville Centre, and since the baptismal service was in the afternoon, we were able to attend. We were there along with Kevin and Diana’s family and friends as they celebrated this special moment in their lives; I was also there out of professional curiosity, to see how my Roman Catholic colleagues preside at the sacrament. Because of the large number of parishioners at St. Agnes, baptisms were celebrated once a month in a special afternoon service rather than at Sunday mass. On this day, there were several families present to have their children baptized, a service where one of the parish deacons presided. The cathedral was filled with all the families and friends of the children being baptized; after being welcomed by the presiding deacon and cautioned not to take flash photography during the service, the liturgy began. Soon, a parade of parents and godparents approached the baptismal font, where the deacon asked each set of adults *“what name do you give this child?”* The child was then called by name and baptized *“in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”* Once the service ended, photographs were allowed, and we left the cathedral for the party where we joined in celebrating the baptism of this child who was now a child of God and a member of the Church which is the Body of Christ.

While I noticed a number of similarities between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran baptismal liturgies, one difference is that Lutherans do not ask *“what name do you give this child?”* The next day when I was in my office, I checked precious Lutheran worship books, and this question does not appear in any Lutheran liturgy in the English language. The child is called by name when by water and the Word they are baptized in obedience to Christ command to *“go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19), but the naming aspect of the Roman Catholic liturgy is not

a part of our worship practice. Of course, the name of a child is an important decision for new parents to make, and family and friends are always eager to learn of the child's name and what went into this decision. Naming a child is critical, because it will be that child's primary means of identification for the rest of their lives. While many people will change their surnames (especially at marriage), it is very rare for a person to change their given names, since our identity is closely tied to the name given to us by our parents at our birth.

There are various traditions associated with naming a child. Some families name children after family members; my middle name, "Peter," was the name of my maternal grandfather. Some parents chose names that are a part of their cultural tradition; my father and many of his brothers have Danish middle names such as Andreas, Elias, Medum, and Skarrup. Some parents choose names that are popular at the time of their child's birth; three of the ten students in my Confirmation class were named David (and there would have been a fourth if my parents went with their first choice for my name). Whatever criteria are used, naming a newborn child is one of the most important decisions for new parents; it is the way in which that child will be known for the rest of their lives.

At the time of the birth of Mary's son in Bethlehem, there were firm traditions regarding the naming of a newborn child. It was commonly believed in the ancient world that a name was not merely a label but a part of the personality of the person who bears it. Names were given by parents, and strangers were required to give their names when seeking hospitality. The traditions were also firm regarding the name of a firstborn male, who would always be given his father's name. In Jewish tradition, the naming of a male child took place eight days after his birth at the child's circumcision, which marked the child's acceptance into the covenant community. The Torah specified the requirements for a circumcision, at which the name of this eight-day-old child would be announced:

- "Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring." – Genesis 17:12.
- "On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." – Leviticus 12:3.
- "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews ..." – Philippians 3:4b-5.

The tradition of circumcision and naming a child eight days after its birth is described by Luke in the first chapter of his Gospel, when eight days after the birth of the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth *“they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father.”* (Luke 1:59). But in an announcement that shocks those gathered for the circumcision and naming, *“his mother said, ‘No, he is to be called John’”* (1:60). Elizabeth did not violate cultural expectations capriciously; she gives the child this name in obedience to the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah that *“your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John”* (1:13). This break with tradition in the naming of this child caused a great reaction from those who gathered for this celebration with the parents of this newborn child:

- “Fear came over all their neighbours, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, ‘What then will this child become?’ For indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.” – 1:65-66.

The circumstances surrounding the naming of the child who would be known as John the Baptist would foreshadow the naming of the child of Mary and Joseph eight days after he is born in the manger in Bethlehem. Our Gospel for this Sunday begins with the shepherds’ response to the angelic pronouncement that *“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”* (2:10-11). After the angels depart, the shepherds respond to the angel’s command that *“this will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”* (2:12) by deciding to *“go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”* (2:15). They enter the city and search diligently until they find *“Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger”* (2:16). The shepherds then join with the angels in proclaiming the good news of the birth of this child, so that *“all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them”* (2:19). But Luke then reports that Mary’s response is different from that of others gathered around the manger: *“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”* (2:19). Mary may have been taking in this scene after all of the extraordinary events that resulted in her giving birth to her firstborn child in a stable far from home placing him in a feeding trough; she may also have been thinking back to the day when she was visited by the angel Gabriel who reported that *“you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus”* (1:31). The woman who had responded to the angel’s announcement by declaring *“here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”* (1:38) now considers the meaning

of these wonderful events that are being fulfilled in the birth of her child. In Luke's Gospel, Mary will be the only adult present in the infancy narrative who will last into the public ministry of her son and even into the early ministry of the Church ("*All these [disciples] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*" – Acts 1:14). Mary's unique reaction to the report of the shepherds shows that "*Mary must have sought to interpret these events surrounding the birth of Jesus and ultimately succeeded, for she became a model Christian believer.*" (Raymond Brown).

The fact that the child of Mary was a Jewish male infant born into a family of observant Jews is emphasized when Luke reports that "*after eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child*" (2:21). Luke's report that "*it was time*" emphasizes a time of completion or fulfillment ("*While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child*" – 2:6). The emphasis in Luke's account falls not on the act of circumcision but on the conferring of the child's name: "*he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*" Unlike the naming of John by Elizabeth, which caused quite a stir among those present at the time his name was announced, there is no hint of objection or fanfare when Jesus is given his name; what is emphasized by the use of the passive voice is that God, not Jesus' parents, is the authoritative source of that name. While the name "Jesus" (*Yeshua*, "God saves") was quite common at the time (it is also the root of "Joshua"), the name also identifies Jesus as one who is holy in every way and whose mission will be the fulfillment of God's promises to God's people:

- "Not only does it signify the bearer's divine status on account of the supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit, it also spells out the specific mission on which his heavenly Father had sent him, that is, to be God's agent of salvation for Israel, and through Israel, for the whole world." – Diane G. Chen.

Luke underscores the significance of the name given on the day of his circumcision by reminding the reader that the name "Jesus" had been given not by Joseph or Mary but by the angel of the Lord. It declared the child's future role as "Saviour" of all people. "*The conferring of the name, therefore, was itself an act of fulfillment.*" (Alan Culpepper).

The account of Jesus' circumcision and naming looks both backward and forward. It looks backward with the reminder that the naming of the child "Jesus" fulfills Mary's obedience to the word of the angel prior to her conception; it looks forward

in that the circumcision of the child on the eighth day begins a series of events reflecting the fact that *“Jesus’ parents represent the best of Jewish piety and obedience to the law of Moses. The story is beginning to unfold ‘according to scripture.’”* (Fred Craddock). While the child does not bear the name of the man who will serve as his guardian, when Joseph takes Mary as his wife and is present when he is given the name Jesus he bestows upon the child his heritage, so that the New Testament might begin with *“an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham”* (Matthew 1:1). Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant promise God makes with Abraham that *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Genesis 12:2-3). Jesus is born in the city of David so that he might fulfill the promise God makes to David that *“he shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever”* (2 Samuel 7:13). Jesus’ circumcision is the sign of the covenant relationship that God established first with Abraham and then with his descendants, the people of Israel. *“Jesus is firmly located within the people with whom God has kept covenant for hundreds of years”* (Ruth Anne Reese). He is given the name “Jesus” so that all people may know that the promises of God have been fulfilled in his birth in a manger and in the name given to him as the one who will *“stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he will be the one of peace.”* (Micah 5:4-5a).

The Name of Jesus falls on New Year’s Day, a time when we look to a new year that will be filled with hope, with new possibilities and new beginnings. While past experience has taught us that the hope that exists on every New Year’s Day is not necessarily fulfilled in the course of the year, we can begin this new year with the same hope that is ours every day of this coming year as it has been the hope that has abided with us in all our years: that the child born of Mary who is named on this day is our assurance that God’s promises have been fulfilled, that God is with us always, that our Saviour is our source of strength and hope that abides with us even in life’s most challenging moments. The name of Jesus is at the heart of the good news of our Christian faith that abides with us every day of this and every new year:

- “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” – John 14:14.
- “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” – Philippians 2:9-11.
- “And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong” – Acts

3:16.

- “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” – Acts 4:12.

As we continue to celebrate the good news of Christmas that “*unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given*” (Isaiah 9:6), we rejoice that the name of Mary’s child has been revealed to us so that we may know that God is faithful and will save us from all that would seek to separate us from God’s love “*in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules in eternity. This is most certainly true.*” (Small Catechism).

- “We, too, are called to proclaim the holy name of Jesus in word and deed, until he comes again. The good news inherent in Jesus’ holy name, that ‘Yahweh saves,’ is desperately needed in our broken world today. May we, like the shepherds, have the courage and integrity to pass on the good news in all its richness and simplicity to anyone God places in our paths.” – Chen.

*What name do you give this child?*

The names we bear were given by our parents who loved us, nurtured us, and gave us the foundation upon which our lives are built. It was those names that were spoken when we were baptized in the name of the one who was born to be our Saviour, whose name is the foundation of our trust and confidence that God is with us always, and that the name of Jesus is the source of the hope that is ours at Christmas and in all seasons as “*we hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*”

Amen.