

January 1, 2017 Name of Jesus
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Numbers 6:22-27, Luke 2:15-21

What's in a Name?

My husband Tim and I were given this gift while we lived in Tanzania, it's an intricately woven wall hanging, made of dried and dyed grasses. You may not be able to read it from there, but on the bottom, it says "Gift from Joventy and Esther," those are the names of the couple who made and gave it to us: and on the top it says the names of the couple who received the gift: Tim and Helen. (Who is this Helen, Tim?) Helen is actually me, or is intended to be me. My name, Erin, was a hard one for Tanzanian tongues, and for some American ones, too. For a while my young nephew called me, "Aunt Ehlughren." Which sounds rather more like retching than I'd like... I wasn't always sure I liked my name, Erin, or how well it fit me: I'm not a drop Irish, to top it off my middle name is Kathleen. Kathleen was the name of the aunt who suggested my name when my parents were stumped. Apparently Erin was a popular one then. I will say that I gained greater appreciation for the challenges of naming when I had children. Choosing a name can be difficult, even daunting.

Mary the mother of our Lord had many challenges as a parent, but choosing a name was not one of them. Mary did not need to come up with a name for her first child. When instead of a pregnancy test, she gets a visit from an angel, she also finds out what to name the child. Maybe the angel figured she already had enough to think about. Nine months later, her son is born. Eight days after that, as today's reading adds, adding a final, less familiar verse to that familiar Christmas Eve reading, eight days later, following Jewish ritual, her son is circumcised and named.

In those eight days, in those days between Christmas Eve and the official naming of the baby, Mary has been pondering. Maybe even more than in the nine months of pregnancy, those days just after a child is born make you ponder—and more, they demand massive shifts in mindset. You see this infant, this completely helpless being for which you are responsible, and your thinking, changes. I remember, among other moments of questioning and second guessing, I remember at one point looking at my newborn and suddenly wondering if we chose the right name. "Do they look like a ????" Does any newborn look like a ??? In some ways, all newborns look like is ???.

I wonder if Mary's ponderings included this, too. I wonder if Mary pondered whether this baby could be what the angel said. I wonder if Mary looked at her newborn child and wondered, "Does he look like a Jesus?" The meaning of the name, "God saves," together with the way he got it, would seem to suggest that this baby is good to go. The course of his life is pre-determined, nothing more to say.

But I don't think it's that simple. I think there's more to what's in a name, and what's not. Maybe you have also read the interesting research on names that is one of the chapters in the book *Freakonomics*. The two authors, who also happen to have the same first name, wonder how determinative a name is. They recount a story about a family in a New York City housing project whose father, Robert Lane, decides to call his fourth child, a son, Winner. The father liked the sound of it, Winner Lane, how could you fail with a name like that? Three years later the family had another, final child, another boy, and Robert named this boy Loser. It wasn't that the child wasn't wanted, Robert is long dead, they don't really know how or why he chose that

name, maybe he just got a kick out of the way the names paired. First a Winner, and then Loser. But with a name like that, what was in store for Loser Lane? Well, he went to prep schools on scholarship, graduated from college and joined the NYC police department, eventually becoming a sergeant. He did not hide his name, but many people were uncomfortable using it; to his colleagues he is known as Lou. His brother Winner, on the other hand, has a criminal record with more than 30 arrests. These two boys' names did not determine their futures, the Freakonomics authors note, and then go on to review a host of research and statistics that show that names are not destiny. (Even if your name is Destiny.)

I think that applies to Jesus, too. Jesus' name was given, but the course of his life wasn't. While that sounds potentially heretical, I think we, like Mary, ought to ponder this. It's all too simple to gloss over familiar gospel readings, to hear the story of God being born as if it's all destined to come out just as it does. But to do so discounts the incredible and very human element to it all: the fragility of becoming a baby, which also requires the assent of a teenage girl, and then all the responsibilities of raising him, the immensity of motherhood, watching over him through an equally fragile childhood, and the tenuousness of his teenage years. We don't know much about any of this, about these early parts of Jesus' life, we can only imagine what it was like, what very human moments helped him become the man that he was.

We do have stories that took place when Jesus was an adult—stories which also cause us to ponder, stories in which a human element has a significant effect. Think of the wedding at Cana: it took his mother's strong urging for Jesus to perform his first miracle. Think of another mother, a Syrophenician woman who will not take no for an answer. She may be an outsider, other people may call her "Dog," but that will not stop her. Her insistence prompts Jesus to heal her daughter. And then Jesus marvels at her faith, and expands his ministry.

Jesus, truly God, is also truly human. Jesus also knows what it is to be given an immense role, to ponder it, to question it, and then, to take it on. Think of that most crucial story, the story of the end of his life, we remember that story every single Sunday at the sacrament of communion, we remember the night in which he was betrayed. We can remember, too, that before his betrayal Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed fervently that the cup of suffering pass from him. Jesus saw the immensity of what was ahead of him—and he could have refused it. Instead Jesus freely accepted it: thy will be done.

All these stories reflect both the immense role that humans have in the story of God with us, and also the incredible humanity of God. I mean this, not only in the fragility and vulnerability all of that entails, but in the astounding assent it gives to personhood, to what is being saved by God becoming human. God become one of us, Jesus, takes the name he has been given, and makes a new future with it. Saves. Jesus makes a new future for all of us.

This applies to us, too, to our futures, to our names, to the future in which we participate, and how. My Aunt Kathleen, my godmother, died too young, but she had such a zest for life. That changes the way I live. And we can also change our names, we change how we say them, we can change what they say about us. Loser becomes Lou. And while I'm even less Jewish than Irish, my name can remind me of Aaron, the priest, we heard about him in today's first reading, Aaron who was told to bless people.

Receive God's blessing, that reading says, and put on God's name. We began this service, eight days after Christmas Eve, remembering a sacrament that is sometimes called a christening, the sacrament of baptism. Baptism does not predetermine the course of our lives, nor does it preclude us from suffering. But in baptism we are given another name, and an immense role: we are called children of God, and called to be a blessing to others.