

The Act of Naming

Luke 1:57-66

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A little over a decade ago, my mother was preparing to move and was going through various boxes and drawers and found a piece of paper. It was a folded up, half-sheet that had been torn in one of the corners. It read “Tennessee Department of Human Services Memo” at the top, with lines for “to” and “from,” and for what the memo was in reference to. Those lines were all left blank and in the space where the memo was to be written, was a list of names. All of the names had their origin and meaning written by them.

This memo sheet is what my mom used to think through and list all the names she considered naming me. Some of them, I am very glad she did not go with—Billie being the main one. She even wrote her own first name, Ramona, which is a Spanish name and is the feminine form of Ramón or Raymond. Ramona means mighty or wise protectress—a very fitting name for my mother. She also wrote her middle name, Leigh, an old English name meaning “of the meadow.” Obviously she went with the name, Leigh, and for my middle name, Kathryn after her favorite actress Katharine Hepburn (although the spelling is slightly different).

No parent fully knows who their child will be when they give them a name, except for maybe Zechariah and Mary whose stories we’ve heard the past couple of weeks. But, many parents do have hopes, dreams, and prayers for who their child will be. I doubt my mom foresaw this life for me when she named me Leigh Kathryn, but I do know that she selected and prayed Psalm 34 over me, hoping some of the words would be true for me and that they would be a comfort throughout my life.

The first three verses of the psalm say, “I will bless the Lord at all times; God’s praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt God’s name together.”

I mean, it doesn’t NOT sound like a preacher!

There’s a lot of Elizabeth’s story that we don’t get. We heard the story of Gabriel coming to Elizabeth’s husband Zechariah to tell him that he and Elizabeth will have a son. Gabriel tells him who their son will be and that he is to name him John. Zechariah doesn’t believe it, and so Gabriel takes away his ability to speak for the next 9+ months. After that, the only information we get is that Zechariah returns home and he and Elizabeth do conceive a child. And then we meet Elizabeth when Mary goes to visit her. Elizabeth’s child leaps in the womb when Mary arrives, and Elizabeth pronounces blessing over Mary because Mary is pregnant with the Son of God.

Aside from that, we don’t know what Elizabeth’s pregnancy was like. We don’t know how she reacted when she discovered she was pregnant. We don’t know if she had questions about why

her husband couldn't speak. We don't know the hopes and dreams she had for her child. We don't know the prayers she prayed for her child. There is a lot we just don't know. It feels like some really key parts of the story have been left out, but yet here we find ourselves at Elizabeth's son's circumcision.

The text tells us that those who came to circumcise the child were going to name him Zechariah after his father, which to me feels pretty bold. But, it would be pretty public that somehow Zechariah had lost the ability to speak, and they certainly weren't going to let a woman name a child, even her own. So they take it upon themselves to name the child, but Elizabeth says, "No; he is to be called John."

I wonder how Elizabeth knew to name her son, "John." Because while Gabriel told Zechariah to name the child John and told him who John would become, Gabriel took away Zechariah's ability to speak immediately after. So, how did Elizabeth know if Zechariah couldn't tell her? I wonder if Gabriel came to visit Elizabeth as well, but no one wrote it down. I wonder if the voice of God came to Elizabeth in a dream or from the heavens and told her, "Your son will prepare people for my son. Your son will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will challenge the empirical and social order. Name him John, which means God is gracious." I wonder.

Somehow, somehow, Elizabeth knew with deep certainty and conviction that her child was to be named John, and she challenges the social order. She dares to speak-up in defiance, in rebellion, in prophetic action. She in her own way helps to prepare the people, the priests, gathered there to do her child's circumcision, for Jesus, by using her own voice, the voice of a woman. She, perhaps, filled with the Holy Spirit speaks-up and names her son.

We don't know the exact hopes and dreams Elizabeth had for her child. We don't know the exact prayers she prayed for her child. But, this act of naming was in its own way, a hope, a dream, a prayer for her child. This prophetic act of naming, foreshadows the person her son becomes.

Singer/Songwriter Brandi Carlile has a song on her album, *By the Way, I Forgive You*, called "The Mother." It's a song about becoming a mother for the first time, and it's also about the child who made her a mother. When Brandi and her wife Catherine decided to have a child, they used Brandi's eggs but Catherine carried the child. Brandi writes in her book about the birthing classes they went to, and how she was expected to fill the role of the dad. Each class they went to, the "dads" were treated like they weren't very smart and obviously wouldn't know how to do anything at all when it came to a child.

This began to wear on both Brandi and her wife Catherine until they both reached a breaking point and decided not to go back to those classes. They found a midwife who specialized in "diverse pregnancy situations," to guide them through the pregnancy. The midwife re-taught them the classes in a way that felt real to Brandi and Catherine, that honored both of them as mothers.

Eventually, they found out their baby was a girl and they decided to name her “Evangeline” meaning “the good news” or “the gospel.” There’s a line in the song about their daughter’s name, and it is one of the most beautiful lines of a song I have heard. Brandi sings about how the world stood against them as they worked to have Evangeline, and then she sings, “And when we chose your name we knew that you’d fight the power too.” It is a hope, a dream, a prayer over their daughter, it is how they chose her name, it has become mine and my husband’s own hope, dream, and prayer for our future children and the names they will have.

The world stood against Elizabeth when she named her son, but she named him anyway I think knowing that he would fight the power too. Her act of naming was a prophetic act of defiance against the powers of the world. It was an act of mothering. In naming her son, she also named herself as his mother, claiming her identity and living fully into it in her own unique, beautiful way.

Brandi and Catherine Carlile’s midwife told them they each needed a mantra for every time the world of motherhood felt like a template they didn’t fit into. Brandi’s mantra and the line that repeats through the song is, “I am the Mother of Evangeline.” She names herself as Evangeline’s mother, claiming her identity and living fully into it in her own unique, beautiful way.

The act of naming is the advent, or beginning, of a story and an identity. Names tell the story. John is the story of God’s grace. Evangeline is the good news for her mothers.

I haven’t been here long enough yet to see or perform a baby dedication, so I don’t know the exact words you say or the promises you make. But in our Baptist tradition instead of baptizing infants we dedicate them to God at the very beginning of their lives. In other traditions infants’ baptisms serve a similar purpose, it is a means of grace dedicating the child to God.

Maybe, however, you were given a name at your birth that never fit. You knew that was not your name, and that you had another name. While they are not yet the most common or widespread in Christian communities, there are trans and nonbinary naming services. In these services those gathered proclaim the name God has always called the person—their name, the name that tells their story. Reaffirming and asserting that this person has always been and will always be a child of God.

In dedications, baptisms, and naming services, there are no last names used. People are called by the name that is theirs, their first name and maybe their middle name too, and then they are called Child of God. Before we are given any other identity, before the world tries to tell us who or what we can or can’t be, before anything else, God has claimed us and named each and everyone of us, Child of God.

They tried to tell her, her son’s name, they tried to say who her son would be, but Elizabeth said, “No. My child is not who the world says he is. My son is John, child of God—because his story is the story of God’s grace.”

When the world tries to tell us who we are or who we can or cannot be, or what identity we do or do not have, our mothering God, like Elizabeth, says, “No. My child is not who the world says they are. This is my child, and they are beloved.”

Your name tells your story.

Beloved, Beautiful, Unique—You, Child of God.