

12.13.15 Advent 3

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"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

The legendary account of the life of St. Christopher, tells the story of a man that was 7 ½ feet tall – with a fearsome face. In a well known part of this legend, a hermit suggests to Christopher that because of his size and strength, he could serve Christ by assisting people across a dangerous river, where many were perishing in the attempt.

After Christopher had performed this duty for some time, a little child asked to be helped across the river. During the crossing, the river became swollen and the child seemed as heavy as lead, so much so that Christopher could scarcely carry him and found himself in great peril. When he finally reached the other side, he said to the child: "You have put me in the greatest danger. I do not think the whole world could have been as heavy on my shoulders as you were." The child replied: "You had on your shoulders not only the whole world but Him who made it. I am Christ your king, whom you are serving by this work." The child then vanished. ("St. Christopher", Lives of Saints, John J. Crawley & Co., Inc.) Today, St. Christopher is known as the patron saint of travelers, and his name was very popular among early Christians because of its powerful meaning: "Christ-bearer".

It's interesting to look up the origin and meaning of our names, but in today's culture, there is no guarantee that a legendary story and powerful definition had anything to do with our parents choosing that name. In my case, both of my parents claim responsibility for naming me Christopher, but neither of them for the reason I would have hoped. Years ago, when I asked my mom why she decided on the name, she said simply, "I just always liked that name." After claiming the decision was his, my dad told me that I was actually named after "Old Chris", a Springer Spaniel; the first dog he can remember as a child.

People have not always been so lax in naming their children. In both the Old and New Testaments we encounter a very different culture. The culture of the Jews was such that names were of incredible importance. A name carried more than your identity, it said something about who you were, or what your God was like, or how you were expected to live. In scripture we even see that God changes the names of certain people to better define who they were or who they would become. Abram's name was changed to Abraham, Jacob's name was changed to Israel; and in our lesson this morning, a baby

boy that everyone expected to be named after his father Zacharias, would be called John. God given names have power and meaning, and this morning we will consider the meaning and importance of the names found in our second lesson: Zacharias, Gabriel, Elisabeth, and John.

We begin with Zacharias: The Lord remembers. One day, within the temple gates the priests were busy with their task of preparing the temple for worship, and among them was an old priest, a quiet and humble man of many years. He was unlike many of the priests in more ways than simply age. While the majority of them hailed from Jerusalem or Jericho this elderly man chose to live in the hill country, in a city of Juda (Luke 1:39). If you were to see Zacharias on that day, you may have noticed a spring in his step, perhaps a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, for he had been "... chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense". (Luke 1:9) In all of his years as a priest, his lot had never been chosen, and he may well have given up hope of ever being selected for this honor, for so many special blessings seemed to pass him by. Today, however, this once in a lifetime opportunity had been given to him. Many thoughts must have filled the mind of Zacharias as he prepared himself for this service. The physical act seemed simple enough. He would enter the holy place alone and spread the incense on the coals. As the assembled congregation prayed outside he was to offer the prayer before the altar and withdraw as quickly as possible, as he exited the holy place he would pause on the steps to offer the Aaronic Benediction – the Priestly Blessing, "The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace, both now and evermore." (Numbers 6:23-27)

Be sure to keep in mind the meaning of the name Zacharias: The Lord Remembers. How many men in this day must have had that name, how many must have uttered it as a silent prayer. In the bleak days of life under Herod the Great, as a fraction of the people they once were, the name cries out to the Lord, "God, remember your people, remember your children, remember your promise." And so on that day with a multitude of faithful Israelites gathered outside, Zacharias humbly entered into the holy place, dimly lit by candle-light. He was alone and perhaps paused for just a second to etch the scene into his memory, a moment of blessing in a lifetime of service, a moment that all too soon would be done. Alone Zacharias approached the altar, alone he spread the incense, alone he waited as it kindled on the coals, the smoke began to ascend, and the multitude outside fell on their faces in prayer. As Zacharias looked up, suddenly he was aware that he was not alone. With trembling fear he lifted his eyes to the figure standing to the right of the altar of incense. No man was to enter the holy place when the incense was being offered, but clearly, this was no man... Before the old priest stood the Angel Gabriel, whose name means, "God is my strength". Gabriel had come to deliver a message, but before he could deliver any message he had to calm the fears

of those to whom he appeared. Zacharias was "... troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John." (Luke 1:12-13) How strange it must have seemed to Zacharias that he should be in the presence of an angel, and equally surprising was the reason for this visit. His prayer had been heard, and not only the prayer for a son; but the prayer that the name Zacharias cries out: "God, remember your people, remember your children, remember your promise." Zacharias will have a son in his old age and that son will be the forerunner to the promised Messiah. Now, whether from fear or doubt, Zacharias dared to challenge Gabriel with the question, "How shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." (Luke 1:18) Gabriel's response reveals again the importance of this message, for this is not only an angel, this is the Angel Gabriel, "who stands in the presence of God" (Luke 1:19). As a sign and a result of his unbelief, Zacharias is told that he will remain silent until these things are accomplished; and as quickly as he appeared, Gabriel is gone, and Zacharias finds himself alone once again in the dimly lit holy place.

The only one who would be more shocked by the promise Zacharias had received must have been his wife Elisabeth. Elisabeth was also a descendant of Aaron – the first High Priest of Israel – and had married a priest. Tradition held that such a woman was double-blessed, but Elisabeth didn't appear to be blessed at all, for she was old and barren. In those days to be without a child was an obvious sign of God's displeasure and it meant that a woman was disqualified from the greatest dream of every Jewish woman – to be the mother of the promised Messiah.

The name Elisabeth means God is my oath, or God is perfection. How many times must Elisabeth have prayed that her perfect God would bless her with a son. Her prayers for a child would end in her old age, but her faithfulness would not. What would have made many bitter did not corrupt Elisabeth. We are told that she and Zacharias "were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless". (Luke 1:6) Zacharias and Elisabeth didn't concern themselves with the whispers and questions of their neighbors, but instead humbly and faithfully continued to serve the Lord.

When his service at the temple was complete, Zacharias returned home, "and after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months". (Luke 1:24) During that time, I wonder how often she must have thought of her name: God is my oath, God is perfection. Just imagine the scene on the day of the baby's circumcision as this elderly couple stands beside their newborn son, family and friends looking on with awe and wonder. What must it have been like for Elisabeth and Zacharias to gaze at their baby boy, a miracle child whose arrival was announced by Gabriel, the angel who

stands in the presence of God.

Now, when they came to circumcise the child; “they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father”. Obviously nobody had bothered to ask Elisabeth what she wanted her baby to be named, for she “answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John.” (Luke 1:59-60) Surprised and confused they turn to Zacharias and ask him the question of what the child should be named. Zacharias “asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John...” (Luke 1:63) He didn’t say, “We would like to name him John”. He said, “His name is John”, for John was the name given to him by the command of God through the angel Gabriel. The name John means: God is Gracious. As we consider why God would choose this name for the child, perhaps our first thought is that God was gracious to an elderly couple in blessing them with a son, but as we think back to the words of the angel Gabriel we see so much more. In the temple, Gabriel said to Zacharias, “... thou shalt call his name John. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1:13,16-17) God is gracious, for He blessed Zacharias and Elisabeth with a son, and He blessed His people with a man named John the Baptist. A man filled with the “spirit and power” of Elijah. Like Elijah, who would stand against King Ahab; John would stand against Herod the Great, a king known for his brutality and ruthlessness. Like Elijah, who preached God’s call to return to true religion; John the Baptist preached in the wilderness, “Repent ye: for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2) John would be the last prophet of the Old Covenant. He was the Old Testament prophet who had come to turn so many of the people of Israel back to their God and to prepare the way for the promised Messiah. John acts as a bridge between the Old and New Testaments – it is to him that the announcement of the Messiah falls, “Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) Jesus would later say, “Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.” (Luke 7:28)

Zacharias, Gabriel, Elisabeth, and John are more than just the names of people in our lesson this morning. The meaning in each of these names says something about who they are, what their God is like, and how they were expected to live. These people all honored their given name by living up to its meaning. If your parents gave you a great name, you should do your best to live up to its meaning. If however, your parents let you down, don’t worry; because far more important than the name they gave you is the name given to you by God. In the book Revelation we read these words, “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will

write upon him my new name.” (Rev 3:12) For all who overcome, your new name is the name of Christ!

This name is the definition of who you are, what your God is like, and how you are expected to live. Jesus told His disciples to live like Him (Mark 8:34-37), to love like Him (John 13:34), and left absolutely no doubt about what He meant by those words when He suffered, bled, and died for us “...while we were yet sinners”. (Romans 5:8) Now, to those who would take on the name of Christ – who would call themselves Christians – He gives a new commandment, a way to honor and live up to your new name. He says, “... as I have loved you, that ye also love one another”. (John 13:34) In other words, just as I have bled, suffered, and given my life for you; so you also (as difficult and painful as it may be) must give your life for one another. This is the definition of your new name. It’s who you are, it’s what your God is like, and in His words: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:35)

"To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen." (Jude 1:25)

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