

What's In a Name?

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Luke 1:67-79

Sermon Series:
Songs of the Messiah

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Frank Zappa played lead guitar for the rock and roll band The Mothers of Invention in the 60s and 70s. Zappa was, to my way of thinking, a rather weird dude. The names of his children are a case in point. Three of his kids are named Moon Unit, Dweezil and Diva Thin Muffin Pigeen.

Celebrities are legendary for picking unusual names for their children, but now it seems everybody is getting into the act. Novel sounding names are on the rise. In the 60s, a quarter of boys and girls received one of ten top baby names. Now, less than a tenth of all baby names originate from this top-ten list.

I've noticed this same trend in baptism. Many of the babies I'm now baptizing are given names my spell check doesn't recognize.

Sociologists tell us parents used to pick names for their children to insure that they would blend in with culture. Now, it's just the reverse. Parents are choosing names for their children precisely to stand out from the crowd. There is something honorable in this quest for originality. After all, each child is unique and special in God's sight. But there's also

a hidden danger, experts tell us. All this focus on originality can lead to narcissism. No, my darling, the world actually doesn't revolve around you.

Chris and I have a two-and-a-half-year-old grandson named Luke. He is being prepped for the arrival of a baby brother in late March. His parents are trying to prepare him for this colossal change in his young life. Luke's parents were sitting with him last week, talking about this brother to come. Becky asked him, "What do you think we should call your baby brother?" "Triangle," Luke said, "Let's call him Triangle." There's a novel name. I don't suppose anyone has chosen this name. His parents are not yet disclosing the name. Somehow I get the impression Triangle is not on their short list.

Parents in America pay considerable attention to the phonetics of a name. Names have to sound right. But in Jesus' day, names were chosen for their meaning. That's why so many Biblical names contain a rich etymology. Biblical people paid more attention to a name's meaning than its sound.

Names feature prominently in the story read a few moments ago.

...even devout people struggle with unbelief.

I'll return to this matter of John's name later in the sermon, but first the story.

Luke's gospel begins with a priest named Zechariah. His name means "God has remembered." Incidentally, there are no less than 30 people in the Bible who carry this name. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, comes from a long line of priests, as well. Her name means "God's promise."

This older couple has been unable to conceive children. Having children was considered a sign of God's favor in those days just as infertility was regarded as a sign of God's reproach. Although their names reference God's remembering and promise, their infertility argues to the contrary. God has seemingly forgotten them.

Zechariah is a member of an association of priests, 18,000 in number, who are descendents of Aaron, the first priest. Every day, a priest is selected by lot to burn incense in the temple as an offering for people's sins. Since so many priests covet this honor, a list has been posted on the temple wall to reference all priests who have yet to be selected for this high privilege.

Zechariah's name is chosen for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. People congregate outside in the temple courtyard on the day Zechariah enters the holy place to perform his sacred ritual. While he is going about his duty, Zechariah is visited by an angel. Since no one has

heard from God in 400 years, the angel Gabriel reassures him, "Do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard."

What prayer? I seriously doubt Zechariah is praying for a child at a time like this. He and Elizabeth are well beyond childbearing years. More likely, he is praying for the salvation of Israel. Gabriel announces, "Your wife will bear you a son and you will call him John."

John? Nobody in the family is called John. John's name means "God is gracious." Little does Zechariah know that his son will help usher in a new era of grace and salvation among God's people.

Zechariah asks for a sign to validate the moment. I tell you, even devout people struggle with unbelief. At the outset of Luke's gospel, Zechariah is identified as being "blameless." Blameless is about as good as it gets. Even blameless people sometimes need a sign.

Allow me to paraphrase Gabriel's response—You want a sign, Zechariah? I'll give you a sign. You'll be rendered speechless until further notice. When Zechariah emerges from the temple, he looks as though he has just seen a ghost. He is unable to render the customary Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:24-26).

True to Gabriel's word, Zechariah and Elizabeth conceive and give birth to a son. On the eighth day, friends and

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family gather for the customary bris ceremony, when sons are circumcised and named to mark their entrance into the family of faith. Everybody expects them to call him Zechariah. But Elizabeth stands her ground, insisting that he be called John. When they take the matter to Zechariah, he writes emphatically on a tablet, “His name is John.” Just like that, Zechariah’s tongue breaks forth into a torrent of words called “the Benedictus,” the Latin word for blessed. “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel (1:68)...who has raised a horn of salvation for us” (1:69). God will honor the covenant made with Abraham and David. God’s promise of salvation will now be realized.

The second part of the song, verses 76-79, are words pronounced by Zechariah over his newly named son. John won’t be following in his father’s footsteps as a priest. “He will be a prophet of the Most High (1:76). His mission will be to prepare the way of one who will bring salvation, forgiveness and mercy.

So what? Right? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

People tell me, “I don’t need God. Things are going well for me. Other people might need God but I don’t.”

Maybe you saw the ad that appeared on buses and billboards around DC earlier this year: “You don’t need God—to hope, to care, to love, to live.”

Maybe the humanist society is right. Maybe some people don’t need God.

Let’s unpack this word “need.” A need is something we must have for survival. We need food and drink to live. A want is something we’d like to have but actually don’t need. It’s hard sometimes to discriminate between our needs and wants, especially in this consumer-driven culture that panders to people’s wants. Much of what I think I need turns out to be mere wants.

Could it be that people need God but are trying to fill the void in other ways? Johnny Lee sang the country song “Lookin’ for Love in all the Wrong Places,” which became part of the soundtrack for the movie “Urban Cowboy.”

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, love qualifies as a human need. We are wired in such a way as to need love; both its giving and receiving. But we’re looking for love in all the wrong places. Maybe this explains G. K. Chesterton’s cryptic quote: “Everybody who knocks at the door of a brothel is looking for God.” You might doubt whether people are looking for God in such moments, but I wouldn’t be so sure. Maybe they are looking for love in the wrong places.

Blaise Pascal was a famous mathematician and scientist in 17th century France. At the tender age of 19, he invented a mechanical calculator and later

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invented a hydraulic press. He put forward the mathematical theory of probability. In his late 20s, he became interested in religion. He wrote about our quest for God in a collection called *Penees*: “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

There is a God-shaped vacuum, what Pascal calls “the infinite abyss,” inside that can only be filled “with an infinite and immutable object,” namely God. God made us in such a way to actually need him. God doesn’t make us this way for self-serving ends. Since God cannot give us anything greater than himself, he gives us himself. God takes human form in Jesus to give us himself.

The band Extreme sang a folk rock song some years ago entitled “Hole Hearted.” The refrain of the song returns to the theme of the song: “There’s a hole in my heart that can only be filled by you.” The lead singer, Gary Cherone, identifies this hole along the lines of Pascal’s infinite abyss. Whether you call it a hole, an abyss or a

vacuum, this missing piece can only be filled with God.

Some of you here will regard this account of John the Baptist as a nice, quaint story. As long as you think, “I don’t need Jesus,” it won’t matter much. But if you ever come to the point where you recognize your need for God and Jesus Christ, such stories could save your life.

You never know how much you need something until you really need it. You don’t know how much you need a doctor until you are seriously ill. You never know how much you need a friend until you are lonely. You never know how much your body craves sleep until you are bone-tired.

You may be one who says, “I don’t need God. Things are going well with me. Life is good.” Check back with me when the pins are knocked out right from under you. Let’s talk when something happens that rocks your world.

You may think that you need God only in specific, restrictive ways. I need God in my church life on Sunday morning, but I don’t need God in my interpersonal relationships, my job or school life. I pray you come to the point where you recognize your need for God in every aspect of your life.

Could it be that we need God but we don’t recognize it? Could it be that we’re looking for love in all the wrong places?