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Baptism of Our Lord
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Like most parents, my parents spent a significant amount of time before I was born dreaming of and discussing possible names for their new daughter. My dad really, really liked Charlotte, but my mom couldn't help the images pigs and spiders from the famous children's novel Charlotte's Web. My mom really liked Denise. My dad joked that with the last name Nees, and the middle initial D., they could have a child named Denise D. Nees. After this realization my mom agreed Denise was not a good idea. Like most parents, they went through name after name. Keeping one, dismissing twenty. But finally the day of my birth came and my parents headed to the hospital with only a list of possible names because they had not settled on one name. My dad tells that when I came into the world, he and my mom knew immediately that I was Elizabeth. To this day he can't articulate why I was an Elizabeth, but there was no doubt in either of my parents' minds. And so Elizabeth I am.

Elizabeth is a relatively long first name. 9 letters and 4 syllables long to be exact. For most children, Elizabeth is a mouthful. All the letters and the syllables tend to get all get jumbled together for young people just learning to talk. So, in day care the mumbled, jumbled syllables of Elizabeth often came out as Vu-va-va. And then that got shortened to Vuva. And so, until I went to school, I was Vuva. But when I got to Kindergarten I had to learn to spell my name, all 9 letters of my long name. My mom used to sit at the kitchen table with me to practice spelling my name. E-L-I-Z-A-B-E-T-H. I was Elizabeth, not Liz, not Beth, not Betty, not Libby – Elizabeth.

Like most people I have a few memorable, childhood nicknames. My dad's favorite nickname for me, especially during my teenage years was LizardBreath. Of course once my friends caught wind of this they felt free to use this particular nickname, especially at the most embarrassing of moments. As a teenager I really didn't like my own name. To me, Elizabeth sounded 'too old.' Now as an adult I have grown to love the fact that I have an old, yet still somewhat rare name.

We all have stories about our names. Stories of why our name was chosen. Stories of nicknames. Stories of your family's name. Some of you have changed your name, others of you have shortened your name or adopted a nickname and still others of you have a name for which you are constantly correcting the pronunciation.

Names carry meaning. Names carry within them our history and our family's history. Names are important. The movement of our society in the last half of the 20th Century has established again and again the importance of names. We have insisted that a grown black man, should be addressed as Sir or Mister, not "Boy". We have affirmed the importance of a married woman being able to freely choose the last name by which she will be called. Names are important.

But lets be honest, while our names and the stories of our names can carry very positive, happy memories and feelings, our names can also carry memories and experiences of pain and hurt. I would venture to guess that all of us, at some point, have been called a hurtful name, sometimes even by people that love us. As a child on a playground perhaps you were called names for being different or a awkward. Or as you grew older people called you names that pointed out inadequacies, character flaws or physical appearance. We become mis-named people.

And just as hurtful as being called a name, are the times when we loose our name. When our name has been forgotten, left out, left off. When we become but a number in a system. When, in an instant our name and reputation is ruined by rumors or gossip. When we get lumped into a group and stereotyped because of where we are from, what we look like, what we have, who we love. We become anonymous, nameless people.

And apparently people have been feeling nameless for centuries. This was the situation with the Israelites in today's first reading from Isaiah. At this point in the book of Isaiah, the Israelites are at one of the lowest points in their history. Babylon, the world's greatest superpower, had just crushed Israel. Many of the Jews were taken out of Israel and into Babylon as prisoners. Most devastating however, was that Babylon had marched into Jerusalem leaving the city in pieces and the temple crushed to the ground. The Israelites found themselves disturbed, distributed and dismantled. They lost their land, their home, their temple. They were unknown to their captors, they lost their names. But they also felt as though the God who promised never to forget them, had abandoned them. They felt like they were nameless, no-ones and nobodies.

Similarly, the people in the crowd in the Gospel reading were full of question and expectation. They were waiting for the Messiah and they were wondering if John the Baptist was it. They didn't need another prophet, or teacher; they needed a Messiah to claim them. They were waiting for God's attention.

And so John the Baptist speaks to the curious, questioning, anticipating crowd and tells them that he is not the Messiah they are waiting for, but Jesus is. It is Jesus who is more powerful than John. It is Jesus who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. And Jesus does come, and he is baptized among and with the people. And after he is baptized with the people he prays. And as he is doing so, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and God speaks about Jesus. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." God speaks and names Jesus. The heavens open at Jesus' baptism and show the fearful, doubting people that this Jesus is the Messiah that they have been waiting for. God's voice from heaven is an Epiphany, a sign, a light, an awakening to who Jesus is and what he has come to do for the world.

And in a similar way, God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to a scared people who felt nameless and abandoned. Though it seemed as though their world was crashing around them, Israel had not been forgotten, far from it in fact. God calls them by name and claims them. The prophet says, "But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

And in the same way God has called your name. God called your name at your baptism. God's very name was placed upon you and God adopted you. And the heavens broke open at the sound of your name because with you God is well pleased. Even though the world has misused or abused your name, God has called you by name and with you God is well pleased.

And God is still calling you by name, still claiming you, still putting God's name on you. God has called each and every one of you here today, just as God has called Molly Margaret to this font today. And in front of us this very day we will see the newest one of God's family called by name and claimed. The heavens will break open and Molly Margaret will be claimed as God's beloved child.

Just as it was for the Israelites, exiled and nameless to their captors, just as it was for the fearful and questioning people around Jesus, so it is for you and me, and for Molly Margaret. "When you pass through waters, I will be with you" says God. "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned and it shall not consume you" says God. I have called you by name, you are mine and with you I am well pleased.