

“What’s in a Name?”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Luke 4:14-21

People tend to take great care when it’s time to pick a name for their baby. It usually starts long before the due date, though some like to wait until the baby’s born, to get a sense of what name might fit best. Parents-to-be often look up what certain names mean. They wonder how it might shape their child’s identity, and imagine how it would feel to say that name countless times. It can be a short and simple process, or lengthy and convoluted.

For our firstborn, Stephanie and I sat down one night at the kitchen table, and each of us wrote down a list of ten names for a boy and ten for a girl. Then we compared lists. Remarkably, only Benjamin was on both of our lists for a boy, which made that easy. We had more matches when it came to a girl’s name, but we quickly decided that Emma just felt right. The middle names were a little bit trickier. Thanks to Stephanie, Ben’s is Michael instead of Ian or Alexander, and I freely admit she got that one right. It took only moments for us to agree that Catherine paired really well with Emma.

Names fascinate me, because they are powerful. They can confer identity, and reveal something about the people who chose them. Just think of nicknames and who picks them and why they stick. (No, I’m not going to share any of mine.) So on this day as we celebrate our patron saint, Luke, after whom this parish is named, I’m curious who chose it and why and how.

Nowadays, for a newly planted Church, it would probably be done by a committee sifting through an assortment of suggestions, God bless their hearts. Over a century ago, though, it’s likely that the Bishop and the Rector talked with a few prominent parishioners, and decided that

this community of Christians would henceforth forevermore be known as St. Luke's. Who knows why they picked that name, but I suspect they had their reasons.

Maybe this fledgling group somehow matched up with Luke. He's described as a physician. Perhaps there were a lot of doctors and nurses in the congregation that first worshipped here. Or it could have been less about occupation and more about vocation. Maybe then, as now, the people of God at St. Luke's heavily invested their gifts and energy into ministries that brought healing of body, mind, and soul.

Perhaps the first edition of St. Luke's in this place was stocked with scholars and authors. Between his Gospel and the sequel we call The Acts of the Apostles, Luke wrote fully one-quarter of the entire New Testament. Or maybe it's less about what people did for a living and more about how they lived: as a people with a thirst for knowledge and a deep desire to share with others the story of salvation in word and deed.

Maybe the first generation of St. Luke's were a spirited bunch, which would match up well with Luke's emphasis on the Holy Spirit on his gospel. Only Luke chronicles the Pentecost event when the Spirit descended and filled the Apostles with power, launching the Church on its mission of compassion and forgiveness.

Whatever the case, I suspect our name was conferred as more than a reflection of present realities over a century ago, but also in the hope of a future potential, perceived under the inspiration of the Spirit. And if so, then bravo to whomever decided that Luke would be both patron and name of this motley crew of sinners striving to become saints. Sure, the name has probably shaped our identity in ways we can't detect, but we've also chosen and been empowered by the Spirit to own and live up to our given name.

We are a people who seek God's healing, humble enough to know that we are all broken and that only God's grace can put us back together again. Yet we seek healing for others and not just for ourselves. We look for ways to bring comfort and hope to the hurting, the lonely, and the afraid. We pursue that sacred work through prayer and simply being present and in acts of kindness and generosity, motivated by the love of Jesus, by our gratitude for his mercy, which makes us aware that every person is a child of God, made in His image.

We are a people blessed with a desire for learning, to work hard for a deeper understanding of the mysteries that evoke our awe and wonder, so that we can share them articulately and accessibly for those looking for a purpose in life, something greater than themselves that can give a person a sense of meaning and belonging.

We are a spirited people. To some, that may not seem to be the case. In worship, we're rather reserved, especially compared to some other churches, but outward signs of ecstasy are not the only indicator that we're being moved by the spirit. The presence of God can carry us away without a lot of jumping up and down, and greeting people after worship, many are clearly jacked-up and ready to roll. Our fellowship gatherings surge with excitement. Our ministries are full of enthusiastic people. There's spiritual energy aplenty here.

Luke also comes from a Latin word that means "light," and the light of God's love shines through us, dispersing the darkness of sin and evil, drawing people far and wide to praise and serve God. We, the Church of St. Luke, are aptly named. However, present reality, great as it may be, offers but a hint of the potential power that resides within the people of this parish. And Luke, our guardian and guide, gives us the key to unlock that potential with a short and simple story around which his entire gospel revolves.

After his tempting in the wilderness, Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the power of the Spirit, and eventually made his way home to Nazareth. On the Sabbath in the synagogue, he read from the prophet Isaiah, choosing verses that spoke with hope of someone “anointed,” Hebrew for “Messiah,” who would turn the world upside down: bringing good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Every person in that synagogue had waited their entire life for that anointed one to come, and they were just the latest in a long line of generations stretching out over several centuries who desperately, eagerly sought out someone who could save them and set them free. Along the way, there had been many contenders. All of them turned out to be pretenders, false Messiahs. Even in that very hour, as Jesus spoke, there were people making the claim that they were the one. How many times had people’s hopes been disappointed?

Jesus set the scroll aside, sat down, and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today. Not at some indeterminate future time, but TODAY. By his presence, the prophecy was fulfilled, and from that moment, Jesus embodied the Kingdom of God, come to Earth for all people, everywhere. Jesus, a derivative of Joshua, was a popular name, but only this Jesus, named by God through the Archangel Gabriel, only this Jesus bore the name that meant “God is salvation,” and lived up to it fully.

He healed the blind, opening their eyes to the glory of God’s creation, but he also gave sight to those who saw nothing but a bleak future ahead. Jesus restored imagination and gave vision to those who would receive it, the gift to perceive that God was doing a new thing in a rather different way than anyone expected. And for those sought and accepted it, an entire new horizon of possibility.

Jesus exorcised demons, releasing from captivity those enslaved to dark forces that corrupt and destroy. He also set free those who were captive to less obvious but no less dangerous forces that led them to actively support or complacently ignore the injustice, cruelty, and selfishness of the age.

Jesus embraced those oppressed by social norms that made them outcasts, ostracized as unworthy, defective, lesser than others. He gave them a place to belong, a sense of purpose that had been stripped from them by people who presumed to be superior, people who used their power to shove them away and push them down. Jesus reached out and touched those labeled unclean and defiled, and he lifted them up and brought them close, scandalizing the self-righteous.

Jesus brought joy. Not happiness or contentment, which are lovely, but joy, like the joy that arrives when a newborn baby enters the world. Jesus brought new opportunities, unimagined and unseen, until he revealed them by his presence. And Jesus calls us to accept what he brought and take it out into the world as a Luke, as a light for all people, so that they can see Jesus, God's salvation, and be swept up into his gracious arms: healed, whole, forgiven, loved, and free.

We're already doing this. We're already living into the name that is above all names, Jesus our Lord. We already living into what it means to be a parish named after St. Luke. The fire is already kindled, shedding light, giving warmth, healing the hurt, telling the story. The Spirit dwells within us, driving us onward and upward. But in God's endless abundance, we can always be magnified, our power increased, our humility deepened, our faith strengthened, eyes opened wide to see concealed needs and imagine fresh possibilities.

This can take time, but if we abide in love, in joy and anticipation, it will come to us, just as a baby's name dawns on expectant parents. And when we receive the vision, an energy arises, bringing fresh life into the world. Amen.