

Advent Reflections

December 23, 2019



WHAT IS IN A NAME?



Luke 1:57-66, The naming of John, Elizabeth and Zechariah son and cousin of Jesus.

In many spiritual traditions, contemplative prayer involves freeing the mind of all thoughts and images. As a result, contemplation for me, with a mind that is very visual and imaginative, is untenable and undesirable; that is until I discovered Ignatian spirituality. In the Ignatian tradition, praying with the imagination, unlike in other spiritual traditions, is contemplation. Ignatian contemplation is a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions. Gospel stories are excellent starting points for practicing imaginative contemplation.

The Gospel narrative of the naming of John, Elizabeth and Zechariah's first-born son and cousin of Jesus, is perfect for engaging in imaginative contemplation. I can easily step into the scene and visualize first-century life in a little town in the hill country of Judea, where Elizabeth and Zechariah are hosting a gathering of family and friends to celebrate the circumcision and naming of their first-born son. It is a warm and friendly crowd chatting while waiting to hear the baby's name spoken aloud for the first time. I am

struck by the hush that comes over the gathering when Elizabeth announces that the baby shall be called John rather than Zechariah, as was the tradition. She does this with dignity and authority though she understands it is not in keeping with the custom of naming the first-born son after his father. Disbelief and questions follow shocked silence. What could Elizabeth be thinking? Has she considered the consequences of their first-born male child having a name different than Zechariah? This implies he would not follow in his father's footsteps and become a priest of the Jerusalem Temple, a hereditary position. Priests have status, an elite group, wealthier than most, and religiously and politically respected. By naming the baby John instead of Zechariah, the family is renouncing its status and its perpetuation. The murmuring gets louder with comments that even disparage Elizabeth, saying how disrespectful and embarrassing Elizabeth's behavior must be for Zechariah. There is general agreement that Zechariah, as head of the house, will not sanction this breaking with this tradition. With a sense of righteousness, the men in the crowd go directly to Zechariah, asking him what the name of the child should be, expecting him to override Elizabeth and give the child his name. Because Zechariah is both deaf and mute, he calmly and definitively, writes boldly on a wooden tablet the name his wife Elizabeth gave to their son, **John**. By doing so, Zechariah breaks with tradition, rejects the crowd's judgment, and stands shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with his wife, Elizabeth.

Imaginative contemplation does not end with merely remembering or going back in time. The practice of Imaginative Contemplation requires using the experience to dig deeper and personalize the meaning behind the story by asking soft and hard questions. What is in a name, my own, my children's, my grandchildren's? When is breaking with tradition and custom the right thing to do? When does speaking out against the status quo do more good than harm? How do I stand in solidarity with those who are disparaged? How I answer these questions can help me live a more mindful, authentic, and faith filled life.

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Reading 1 [MAL 3:1-4, 23-24](#)

Thus says the Lord GOD:
Lo, I am sending my messenger
to prepare the way before me;
And suddenly there will come to the temple
the LORD whom you seek,¹
And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire.
Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.
But who will endure the day of his coming?
And who can stand when he appears?
For he is like the refiner's fire,
or like the fuller's lye.
He will sit refining and purifying silver,
and he will purify the sons of Levi,
Refining them like gold or like silver
that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD.

Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem
will please the LORD,
as in the days of old, as in years gone by.

Lo, I will send you
Elijah, the prophet,
Before the day of the LORD comes,
the great and terrible day,
To turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,
and the hearts of the children to their fathers,
Lest I come and strike
the land with doom.

Responsorial Psalm [PS 25:4-5AB, 8-9, 10 AND 14](#)

R. (see Luke 21:28) Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Your ways, O LORD, make known to me;
teach me your paths,
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my savior.

R. Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Good and upright is the LORD;
thus he shows sinners the way.
He guides the humble to justice,
he teaches the humble his way.

R. Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

All the paths of the LORD are kindness and constancy
toward those who keep his covenant and his decrees.
The friendship of the LORD is with those who fear him,
and his covenant, for their instruction.

R. Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand.

Alleluia

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

O King of all nations and keystone of the Church;
come and save man, whom you formed from the dust!

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel [LK 1:57-66](#)

When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child
she gave birth to a son.
Her neighbors and relatives heard
that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her,
and they rejoiced with her.
When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child,

they were going to call him Zechariah after his father,
but his mother said in reply,
"No. He will be called John."
But they answered her,
"There is no one among your relatives who has this name."
So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called.
He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name,"
and all were amazed.
Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed,
and he spoke blessing God.
Then fear came upon all their neighbors,
and all these matters were discussed
throughout the hill country of Judea.
All who heard these things took them to heart, saying,
"What, then, will this child be?
For surely the hand of the Lord was with him."