

Called by Name

Isaiah 43:1-13 & Acts 17:22-34

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Have you ever been called by the wrong name? Let me tell you, as a double named female, it happens to me a lot. Mary Katherine, Kathleen, Mary, MC (instead of the correct MK). You come up with a variation that's kind of like my name but not my name, I can assure you – I've heard it. Like the classic southern mother I am, I also named my first-born child a Mary double name, so she deals with this quite often, too. One of my favorite stories related to being called the wrong name happened this past fall when my daughter, Mary Eliza, started Middle School. She was on an email chain with one of her friends and a teacher who didn't know her yet. In one of those emails the teacher referred to Mary Eliza as "Mary". Before Mary Eliza could even think about responding, her friend replied, "Sounds great. Just a quick thing. Mary likes to be called Mary Eliza."

How does it feel to be called the wrong name?

How does it feel to be called the correct name?

Back in March, my family traveled to Utah to hit the "Mighty Five" National Parks for Spring Break. The final park on our itinerary was Arches, right outside the hip town of Moab. One thing you have got to know about my family- if we are in a new town, we will find a bookstore and we will purchase books. Even if said purchases require us to make room in our luggage to fly them home. On our last evening, we stumbled upon one of the coolest bookstores I've ever been to – Back of Beyond Books. In fact, we still talk about it often because of how well curated and diverse its offerings were. Well, my eye landed on a book that I had never heard of but looked interesting, "The Greenlanders" by Jane Smiley. After reading the synopsis on the back – "Set in the fourteenth century in Europe's most far flung outpost...Jane Smiley takes us into this world of farmers, priests, and lawspeakers, of hunts and feasts and long-standing feuds, and by an act of literary magic, makes a remote time, place, and people not only real but dear to us" – I simply had to have it. I must admit that I did not fully examine how many pages it was and how small the print and margins of each page were before purchasing. Fast forward six weeks and I finally finished it on the very last day of April. It took me an ENTIRE month to read this book when I normally read between 4-6 books a month. And I was diligent. I not only read at night before bed, but I also read it while drinking my coffee in the morning and for an hour each day after work before turning to chores and dinner. It was interminable. I

often told my colleagues here at the church about my angst surrounding this book and my quest to finish it. They questioned, “Why do you keep reading it if it is so interminable?!” It wasn’t that I wasn’t invested in the characters. Or that I didn’t enjoy it or learn things from it. It was just SO LONG. As the New York Times reviewer wrote after the novel’s publication in 1988, “It takes a certain disciplined curiosity to get through this tome, except by incremental readings, perhaps on a hundred winter nights.”¹

I will admit something to you- this is also how I felt about our Confirmation journey at times this year. That it was never-ending. During my tenure at Westminster, we have held Confirmation classes for our 9th graders during the spring semester and primarily during the season of Lent. This means that we are kicking things off in late January and finishing things up in April. Does anyone remember what happened in late January and early February this year? Snow. Ice. And lots of it. Church and activities cancelled two weeks in a row. Those two weeks happened to encompass our second class session AND our retreat. That’s a significant portion of material to make up in just two months. I held make-up session after make-up session. When it came time for my report during staff meeting each week, it was always the same – I taught Confirmation...again. I’m preparing for Confirmation...again. Steve, please set up the tables in the Fellowship Hall for Confirmation...again. And every Thursday, it was the same in my email to the students and their parents – I’m hosting yet another make-up session and I need you there!

Confirmation 2026 does not only parallel the novel *The Greenlanders* in interminableness, but there is also another way it parallels the Norse saga I came to love – NAMES. Names and the practice of naming someone is integral to that story. Like other cultures throughout the world, Nordic cultures with Viking roots have a tradition of last names that is different from the way we pass down last names in America. Rather than giving a child some combination of parental last names, children in Nordic cultures are given a unique first name and then the first name of a parent (most often the father) becomes their last name, with either “son” or “dottir” added to it. Taking my Norse saga for an example, the main characters are a brother and sister named Margret and Gunnar. Their father is Aesgeir. So, her full name is Margret Aesgeirdottir and his full name is Gunnar Aesgeirson.

Each year our Confirmands receive two gifts from the church. The first is a Bible that they receive at one of our first Confirmation classes. The second is a keychain that they receive on Confirmation Sunday. The keychain has the name of our church on the one side and a verse from Isaiah on the other – “I have called you by name. You are mine.” In my opinion, this keychain is a perfect gift for our Confirmands. Why? Because at the end of 9th grade you are likely driving or close to driving and this serves a practical purpose. It also reminds

¹ [Her Saga of a Giant Island](#)

you of who you are and whose you are while you're out there on the open roads. Each one of you is a beloved child of God. You are God's daughter or God's son. God knows you by name, promises to be with you, and has a call on your life.

At first glance, our two Scripture lessons today don't seem to have much in common. One is a beautiful and poetic assurance from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The other is Paul's rousing message to the people of Athens in the early days of the Church. But when you dig in, you find that they both have to do with the power of a name. Isaiah 43 reminds us that God always calls us by the right name. Hear the first verse of this reading again,

*"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."*

Did you hear it? The names? Jacob. Israel. You are mine. Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebekah and God chose him to be the father of a new nation of chosen people, giving him the new name of Israel in the book Genesis. God knows his old name and gives him a new name to signal the call God has placed upon his life. When Isaiah uses these two names – Jacob and Israel – he is talking about the person who lived in the time of Genesis. But he is also talking about all of God's chosen ones from over the centuries. This portion of the book of Isaiah was written during the time of the Babylonian Exile. That's when the people of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians and made to leave their homes and live in a foreign land. Where customs were different. Naming practices were different. Religion was different. It was disorienting and scary. Through Isaiah's words, God was reminding them that they are still known. They are still called by name. They are beloved.

Acts 17, in a similar vein, empowers us to call God by the right name. At that time, Christianity and Judaism were not widespread in Greece. The people there worshipped all manner of gods (little g), as we know from Greek mythology. Paul is saying, these gods are not the God of all creation. God is God. The God who created the world and calls us his children. The God who gave Jacob a new name. The God who sent Jesus to walk this earth. The God who raised Jesus from the dead. That God is God. Not Zeus or Apollo or Athena or some unknown and unnamed god that some altar is trying to appease or cajole with empty words and hearts.

Back to Mary Eliza's friend. The one who wrote the email? Her name is Hattie Halphen. She occasionally goes by the endearing nickname, "Mad Hatter," when she's tearing up

the soccer field, starring in a musical, or killing it in Battle of the Books. Maybe you have a friend like her. Hattie and Mary Eliza have been the best of friends since the earliest days of elementary school. They play soccer together, are on swim team together, are part of the “Snow Cone Sisters” together, and get up to all kinds of neighborhood shenanigans together. Hattie lives two doors down from us and they spend nearly every afternoon together. They are a little bit of ying and yang, but they are loyal to one another to a fault. Knowing Hattie, it did not surprise me in the least that she sent this email. As a mother, I absolutely loved it. I am thankful my child has a friend who knows her by name, calls her by name, and reminds others to do the same.

How does it feel to be called by the correct name?

How does it feel to be given a new name?

The new name I’m talking about isn’t one in the tradition of Viking influenced Nordic cultures of old or a nickname your friends gave you or even a new name you take on when you get married. The new name is the one God gives you.

Ty, God’s child. Spencer, God’s son. Claire, God’s child. Mary Beth, God’s daughter. And so on and so on...for each and every one of you (point to Confirmands) and each and every one of you (point to the congregation).

Here’s my challenge to not only our Confirmands but everyone in this sanctuary today – Be people who know the power of a name. Be people who are bold enough to call God by name. To claim the one God of Israel made known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as your Lord. Point out God’s awesome work in the world. Be people who know that God calls us by name. Be people who remind others of that truth. And don’t just call them by their names given at birth, call them by their new names too – son or daughter of the Lord. Child of God.

Amen.