

August 23, 2020, Sermon

Names are significant. Names are meant to mean something or stand for something like being named after a grandparent or a special friend of the family. If you don't know someone's name, you won't ever be able to call on them or to them. It's hard to communicate with someone when you don't know their name either.

Now in America, people have a first and last name. Some people change their birth names for various reasons too. I'm not sure if this would happen as often as it does if people were to be given names that mean something... because every name matters because names say something about who we are.

My name Anton or Tony is said to mean – the Precious one. The politics of naming is also important. And the way it's being done is taking on a new form. People are now using techniques in naming a child which include dropping portions of each name, interweaving the names or rearranging names. For instance, Audrey and Melissa could

become Audlissa or Melrey. Samantha and Isabella could become Samisa or Anthabella. Get creative and be open to the possibilities!

What you are called and who named you – these things set your place in the world and sometimes set you apart.

Today I want to talk about your name... I mean the name of your church community called Elim Lutheran Church. You are the church and you have been given this name for a reason. Now, I'm not sure what your charter members were thinking when they named this congregation, but I would almost bet that it had something to do with this location, too.

Let me start with the meaning of the name Elim. In the Hebrew language, "el" could mean tree or god. The plural form would be "elim." Now, you probably already know this, but the name Elim is also Biblical. Elim was an oasis in the desert during the time the Israelites were wandering in the dessert after fleeing from Egypt.

When they found the oasis of Elim, the Israelites and the mixed multitude saw the hand of God providing them the trees and springs of

water. That's where the El in the name Elim starts to make sense. God lead them to water and shade.

The Biblical description indicates it is a small area, as it only had 70 palms and 12 wells. Another possibility is that Hebrew root word of "Elim" is "Eloth" or "Elath," meaning a small group of trees, or a grove.

So, the Israelites stumbled upon one of their best ever places to camp, rest, and refresh. Elim had twelve springs of fresh water and plenty of shade from the date palm trees to rest under. It was a place of respite from the rough life in the desert.

Now, there are a few other Elim churches in the world and this is how one of them describes Elim. They start by saying what Elim is NOT.

Elim is not a place of trial and bitterness. Elim is not a place of reminiscent afflictions, agony, and hopelessness; a place where one must handle the "not good enough" somehow and try and make it work. Elim isn't a place where one is forced to find solutions to problems, answers to questions, and alleviate pain by working hard. Not a place of matters to resolve and requirements to fulfill in order to experience abundance

and sufficiency. Elim is not the place to be reminded that one is imperfect and must work hard to address the lack thereof.

Now at this point this one church changes the tense to present declaring not only what Elim was... but what it is. At Elim there is nothing to be proven, neither to God nor to another fellow man. There are no specific conditions mentioned to be met in relation to Elim in scriptures that an individual or a group of people must meet in order to be blessed and have none of the diseases and plagues be put on them as it was the case of Pharaoh. At Elim one is offered rest and abundance freely.

“Elim” is a place of natural blessings. A place where the people of Israel had nothing to tweak and change to make it better and suitable to their needs. Elim is a perfect place for a weary people. A place that offered more than enough. Plenty of fresh water and shade to rest in.

In other words, Elim - Truly was and is the best place to camp for a while. Everything that was needed by a needy people this place offered and offered plentifully. If the twelve springs of water somehow

represented the twelve tribes of Israel traveling through the desert, that would mean that every single tribe was provided for in good measure. No tribe was being left out and no one from the presence of God will remain unsatisfied. All one blessed in every way in God's perfect way.

So the question I have for you today is: what do you believe to be the case at Elim Lutheran Church, in Fargo North Dakota. Biblically, it is was where in God's presence - at God's provided oasis - no one would be left out from God's provision and blessedness.

I have heard that Elim is struggling today and having a difficult time looking positively toward your future roll and place in this world. I would encourage you to look to your name and see what the wandering community in this area are searching for. Can you be an oasis with plenty respite and water for everyone? Can you live up to your name?

I hear from my mother that is one of the new outreach ministries that a few of you are helping with. It sounds like there is a lot of water bottles being given out to the thirsty. This is what your name is calling you to

be and do.... But there is much more that could be done with the name ELIM.

A name will always say something about who we are. Maybe a name can say something about who shall become.

Let's take a look at the name Jesus. The Biblical Jesus of Nazareth was often asked about his identity. He even turned the tables once, asking his disciples, "Who do YOU say that I am? It's a good question. Let's consider it looking through modern eyes in our culture...

Scripture is pretty clear that Jesus was Jewish. Aside for the abundant biblical evidence, consider the following: He went into His Father's business; He lived at home until He was 33; and He was sure His mother was a virgin, and His mother was sure He was God!

But ... Jesus might have been Italian because he talked with His hands; He had wine with every meal; and He used lots of olive oil. Jesus might have been a Californian because He never cut his hair; He walked around barefoot; and He started a new religion.

Jesus might have been Latino because He was bi-lingual and, well...His name was “Jesus.” Jesus might even have been a woman because He had to feed a crowd at a moment’s notice when there was not food; He kept trying to get the message across to a bunch of men who “just didn’t get it;” and even when He was dead, He had to get up because there was more work for Him to do!

So... Who do YOU say that He is? I pray that you answer as Simon Peter did, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Now in today’s Gospel reading, the time has come when Jesus needs to reveal his true identity, his name, to the disciples. Jesus knows who he is, but he checks with the disciples to see what they and others in their community are saying about him. “ He asks, Who do people say that I am?”

Many people get his identity wrong; they call him John the Baptist, Elijah, or even Jeremiah... one of the prophets of old. It seems that no one really knows who he REALLY is or even his real name. They call him names, the wrong ones, names THEY made for him and NOT the

one God created for him. And Jesus really doesn't tell them either. It's as if he doesn't want them to know... maybe it is because not everyone will be able to handle it.

So again, he asks his disciples, "Who do YOU say that I am?" He poses this question to them because he knows that sometimes those closest to us may not truly know us either. When Peter jumps up and confidently states, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." it's as if Jesus pours out a "rock" steady blessing on him for naming him rightly.

Now Jesus seems relieved that Peter know His name, even though the timing is not right to spread this information further... it's like the culture is not ready for the true meaning behind his name. So Jesus demands that the disciples not tell anyone that he is the Messiah... yet.

Jesus knows that his name will not be fully accepted. Some will continue to call him other names. Some won't accept who he is. They will think he is crazy and try to fix him by praying for him. So Jesus only entrusts his disciples with his identity. Peter can be trusted and is praised for it.

So, what does this mean for us. What does this portion of the Gospel story have to do with us Christians at Elim Lutheran Church? Great questions for the day! Well, people want to be who they are as sons and daughters of the living God. We want others to know we are believers in Christ don't we?

Well, can others be trusted with our real identity as baptized Children of Jesus the Christ, Son of the Living God? Do others know what the name of this church means? Maybe it is time to let people know. Maybe this realization can bring new-life into this historical church.

Well we each have our own idea as to the time and place we let people know. But as the Church we provide a safe place for the truth to be heard. And we should want to hear the truth. This is what this story has to do with all of us. Peter is given the title the ROCK in which God has built His church. WE are the church. Then the sentence in our reading goes on stating, "and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Now let me give you a quick background on this statement. Hades is the realm of the dead. It is NOT the place of punishment. It really is a

biblical expression of the gates of death. It is literally meant to say that the realm of the dead, which NO human can conquer, is nevertheless NOT stronger than the church founded on the ROCK, and the church will always endure to the end of history – always being lead by the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In other words, the church will never die and it will never be taken over by the powers of evil because it is founded on the ROCK. The church is pictured victoriously, breaking down the gates of Hades and the powers of death will never prevail. We are the church.

We worship our Messiah here at a place known as Elim Lutheran church which does change from time to time and can show signs of deterioration... but this church may never die even though your demographics and circumstances are constantly challenging the way you live out your mission. YOU are the church. Your future is up to you.

Even though we may feel a bit battered by the changes of the world our mission can also change and we can succeed.

We want our church buildings to last forever. The reality is that they are to decay and deteriorate over time. But that should not be our vision for our churches!

Jesus intends for us to have a bolder, more dynamic vision than that.

And we can only do that when we remember that WE are the church - given the name of Elim Lutheran Church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - and you are built on a strong foundation where Peter is the ROCK and God accompanied by the Lord. Together God's church will live forever. AMEN.