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The Second Tuesday Advent "What Will This Child Be?"

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THE SECOND TUESDAY OF ADVENT
December 11, 1990

"WHAT WILL THIS CHILD BE?"

Scripture Passage: Luke 1:57-66

Luke's account of John's birth evokes the two central questions at a child's birth, the practical and the philosophical—"what will we call the child?" and "what will the child be?"

Most of us name our children with great care. We consider a name's sound, length, meaning, and connotation. Often we chose or avoid names because of people to whom those names already "belong." More often than not we pick family names, including our own.

Names can tell us a great deal about families. Mine originally left France for America, and a measure of their choice can be taken by those who know that "Napoleon Granade" has appeared in every generation since then (though rarely do the bearers use anything other than the diminutive "Nap"!).

We grow to suit our names. Our family sometimes kids about names, especially since Andrew and Stephen have become thespians. When the matter arises, our stock answer is, "but you LOOK like" an Andrew or a Stephen, Ronnie, or Ray.

We come to be identified by certain names. All of us have names which are legally ours but by which we are generally unknown. Sometimes a nickname rather than any of those legal ones identifies us. Sometimes we choose new names, remaking ourselves by establishing an identity separate from the old name we have discarded. It may be as simple as using a different name

when we change locations or meet new people, or as complicated as a legal procedure.

We identify with certain names. Sometimes they are borne by people we admire and attempt to emulate. Sometimes they are the names of kin, whom we cannot choose, or organizations, which we can. Often they are names we share with others, as my own fondness for the Old Testament story of Samuel attests.

Perhaps most importantly in this story, Luke poses for us the issue wrapped up in the juncture of these two questions. We look at John or the child in the manger and say “we know what he will become, for we know his name, we know what he was and is.” Yet as we look at those around us, we have no such hindsight. Through the mouths of John’s neighbors Luke poses for us the issue of what we shall be. John carried a different name from his father’s, despite neighbors’ expectations. His clear differentiation raised their question about his future. Like him, we should be different, and like him, we should have others asking “what will he be?” Most importantly, we should be asking ourselves, “what will we be?” The future offers promise, and the manger child offers forgiveness and the possibility of change and beginning again regardless of age—the chance to be all that God gave us to be.

Samuel Ray Granade