

“What’s in a Name?”

4th Sunday of Advent—Year A

Isaiah 7: 10-16

Matthew 1: 18-25

December 22, 2019

“What’s in a Name?”

It’s hard to overstate what it took for Mary to say “Yes” when the angel came asking. It was absurd. She was 12, 13, *maybe* 14—tasked with mothering God.

It’s all so ridiculous that I, for one, don’t blame Joseph one bit for planning to, as Matthew puts it, “dismiss Mary quietly.” I mean, your fiancé tells you she’s pregnant... and you *know* you’re not the father?

But an angel comes to Joseph with yet another absurd message “Don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, Joseph, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She’s pregnant with a son. And you will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

We’re so used to reading this story each year the absurdity can easily wear off. But not only is Joseph supposed to believe that Mary didn’t cheat on him... he’s supposed to believe the boy she’s carrying is divine. And, oh yeah, Joseph, if that’s not enough, you don’t even get to pick out the name. He’s already got that. You have to name him “Jesus.”

.....

It’s strange... but ever since I became a father that tiny, seemingly inconsequential part of the story has really stuck out to me. *Mary and Joseph didn’t even get to pick their child’s name.*

I remember choosing names for our kids was one of the things Melissa and I cherished when she was expecting. We talked about it all the time. What names she liked. What names I liked. What names connected with family. What names had special meanings.

That last one was particularly important to me—the meaning of a name. And it played a significant role in the names we eventually chose:

Matthew means “a gift from God.” And he is.

Abigail means “the source of a father’s joy.” And she is.

Jasen means “The Lord is my salvation.” And boy is that true!

A gift from God, a source of joy, and the Lord is my salvation.

Now I don’t do this anymore, but when Matthew and Abby were little, about once a week I’d ask them, “Hey—what does your name mean?” And with a roll of their eyes one after that other they’d say, “A gift from God” and then “A Father’s Joy.” Jasen’s largely been spared that.

I know it’s a strange thing for a father to ask young children, but it was—and still is—important to me that my kids know what their names mean, and that their names reflect their reality.

They are gifts from God. They are sources of joy. They are saved by God.

.....

Then there's my name. Robert. As far as I can tell it means something like, "of fame." I never really understood that; and clearly, I'm not famous. But that's not to say I don't like my name. I do. Or better said, I like *why* I was named Robert. After my grandfather—my mother's dad—to whom I was quite close. It's a connection I particularly cherish now that he's gone.

.....

But that's me and my kids.

How about you? Do you like your name? Do you know what it means?

Or perhaps you don't know what it means but there's a story behind it... a story of why you were named what you were?

And parents, what about the names for your kids? Are there stories or reasons you gave your child the name you did? Does your child know that?

.....

Now, if not, please do not feel bad. Don't feel as if you *should* know what your name or your child's name means.

I recognize that I look at names differently from most folks. You could say I'm a bit of a name geek.

It's an interest that didn't actually begin until seminary. It was then that I learned how important names really are in both the Old and New Testaments, and how the meaning behind a Biblical character's name usually connects to that character's lived reality.

This is why, according to the Gospel of Matthew, the angel doesn't give Mary or Joseph a say in what to name their child. "You will name him Jesus," the angel says, "for he will save his people from their sins."

No family name... no favorite nick-name. Like it or not, "You will name him Jesus."

Now, it's far from clear amid our English translations. But the name "Jesus" is actually the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua... and Joshua, in Hebrew, literally means, "God saves."

So when the angel tells Mary and Joseph to name their child Jesus, he's saying, "The name of your son will be "God saves," because in this baby God is saving the world.

And not just that.

The Gospel of Matthew goes on to connect the name "Jesus" with the prophecy of Isaiah, who predicted a young women would one day bear a son, and that son will be named Immanuel, which means, "God with us."

So we have Jesus—God saves. And Immanuel—God is with us.

Suffice it to say, if it wasn't clear before, this ain't no ordinary baby. Matthew is stating right up front this unborn child will do what only God can do. For this child is Immanuel—God-with-us. This child is Jesus: God saves us!

God with us to save us.

.....

Now, if you don't mind, bear with me for one more moment as I finish getting my name-geek on. I want you to notice one more important thing that is so, so often missed.

Emmanuel means... what? "God with us." Not God *was* with us. Not God will be with us. But God IS with us.

And Jesus means, what? "God saves us." Not God saved us, past tense. Not God will save us, future tense.

Which means something incredibly important for you and me this morning. **Advent's journey into Christmas is not just about what happened 2000 years ago or what will happen someday in the faraway future. Advent's journey into Christmas is also very much about what God is doing today.**

Emmanuel. God IS with us. Jesus. God saveS us.

.....

Ironically, at Christmas time this can get awfully hard to remember, can't it? The holiday season can bring so much stress and frantic busyness, just as it can bring up fresh grief and struggles amid a season that may no longer feel as full or joyful as it once did.

And if we're being honest, I think the message of what God is still doing even tends to get lost in the pretty little manger scenes we recreate that try to turn the incarnation of God into a sort of fairytale storybook...

Because it's not—Christmas is *not* a fairytale. Nor is it merely a memory of what God once did some two millennia ago.

No. When we celebrate Emmanuel—God is with us—we celebrate how God is *still* choosing to be with and among the grieving and the lonely and broken and marginalized, wherever they may be. When we celebrate the arrival of Jesus—God saves us—we celebrate the promise that God loves us too much *not* to come to us... offering us salvation not once or some time long ago... but salvation at every turn, at every break, at every grief, at every need, at every hope, if we but have the faith to trust where God is and what God is up to.

Emmanuel. God is with us. Jesus. God is saving us. Again and again and again.

.....

So this season friends, let us celebrate the present reality that *is* Christmas, knowing it need not be the end of December to celebrate **God's intrusion into the world for you and for me and for all, because God loves us too much to live apart from us.** The hope... the love... the joy... the peace we are given is named Emmanuel. Jesus! God with us to save us. Now and always. Amen.