



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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CHRISTMAS DAY

December 25, 2014

“Give Him the Name Jesus”

(Matthew 1:20-21)

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“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:20-21).

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, grant that the birth of Your only-begotten Son in the flesh may set us free from the bondage of sin; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever wondered if your family name was changed at Ellis Island? Many of our ancestors, immigrants, spoke little or no English, so when the clerk said, "Name?" the suspicion is your ancestor may not have been able to spell it out clearly in English, or the clerk may have been impatient, or decided your name was just too complicated and shortened it for you.

The truth is that seldom happened. Historians say that if your family name underwent a change in America, you can be pretty sure the only person responsible for that was your ancestor, not some clerk. Many of these immigrants were highly motivated to find work and assimilate into American culture. A shortened, simplified, Americanized name gave them a better chance.

Similarly, every year our church hosts a group of foreign scholars for the weekend from the University of Wisconsin. Many of them are from the Far East. When they first arrive and introductions are made, they will give you their full name in Chinese. I always panic a bit at that point thinking to myself, "How on earth am I going to remember that?" One year I think our guest saw my concern because he graciously added, "you can call me Bob."

In the biblical era names even more important than they are today, not lightly given, not lightly changed. Names back then represented the essence or extract of who you were. They were your reputation. God said to Abraham, "I will bless you and make your name great" (Gen. 12:2). Often names told people what you did: Joseph the carpenter, or where you were from: Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes they indicated what you looked like.

“Esau” means the hairy one, because of his appearance at birth. Sometimes they were a confession of faith. “Isaiah” means “the Lord saves.”

In the Bible, when God gives a name it marks the new things God is doing in the world. For example, when God promised to Abram that he would make him the father of a new nation, he changed Abram’s name into Abraham, which means “father of many”.

Similarly, in the New Testament Saul the Pharisee and persecutor of Christians has a blinding encounter with the risen Christ. He is converted to the Christian faith, and is given new work, (to be a messenger of the Gospel). To mark this new thing God is doing, he changes Saul’s name to Paul. Names are important in the Bible, especially when God gives them. And there is no name more important than the name Jesus.

As you know there are two birth narratives in the gospels: there is the one in Luke that we read last night on Christmas Eve, and then there is Matthew’s account that we read this morning. Luke, in a sense, focuses on the birth from Mary’s perspective: the visit of the angel Gabriel, the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of the census. She gave birth and laid him in the manger because there was no room in the inn. The visit of the shepherds.

Matthew, on the other hand, seems to tell the story through the eyes of Joseph. “Before they came together she was found to be with child.” Joseph, therefore, is thinking he’ll divorce Mary quietly. But then an angel shows up in Joseph’s dream: “*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*”

That’s how it would unfold of course. “When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took Mary home as his wife, but he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

That’s an important part of the story. Both Joseph and Mary had been told by the angel separately, “Give him

the name Jesus.” His name Jesus indicates what he will do. It literally means “Yahweh saves”, or “the Lord saves.” Mary and Joseph didn’t get to choose the name for him. “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

A friend of mine, a pastor himself, recently went to a family funeral. It’s a family that, over the years, has been decimated by alcoholism. And again this time the funeral was that of a young man in his early forties who died of alcoholism. My friend said the pastor who handled the funeral did a really nice job and brought much hope and comfort to the family. The sermon was very good, he said, with one important exception. The pastor left out the name “Jesus”. He talked a lot about “God” and “God’s love”. He mentioned some ideas about hope, but never talked about the man Jesus, the Savior Jesus, and the forgiveness of sins Jesus came to win for all people, including alcoholics.

Sometimes it seems people are reluctant, (afraid even) to use the name Jesus. It’s not out of a deep sense of reverence because it certainly comes out when people stub a toe or miss a short putt. So if it’s not out of reverence then why do we avoid using the name Jesus?

I think it has something to do with our pluralistic culture. In a nation that has many different religions, the name Jesus is just too specific, seen as exclusive, and therefore not safe for use outside these walls. For the same reason, it’s a holiday tree now, and not a Christmas tree . . . a winter concert, not a Christmas concert, and the musical selections sanitized of anything sacred, focusing instead on Rudolf, snowmen and elves, which in my opinion is just musical malpractice. Personal pronouns are also out because they’re embarrassing; way too masculine. And so we get sentences like, “God came down into God’s creation to give God’s hope to God’s people” which I find distracting and nauseating. The name Jesus makes people nervous because it is way too specific and exclusive for our culture, so even Christians evade it, preferring to use “God” or “Lord” or even “the big guy upstairs”.

“You shall call him Jesus” the angel said to Joseph . . . and us. Don’t be afraid to use the name Jesus, because Luke wrote in Acts chapter four, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is **no other name** under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (v. 12). Don’t avoid using the name Jesus, because Acts 10 says “whoever believes in him receives forgiveness of sins **through his name**” (v. 43). Don’t abstain from using his name, for when the seventy-two returned they said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” (Jn. 14:6). Don’t resort always to the ambiguous “Lord” or “God”, for Peter said to the crowd of thousands, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts. 2:38). Don’t hesitate to call on the name of Jesus, for Paul writes in Romans, “everyone who calls on his name will be saved.” Don’t shrink from the name Jesus, for 1 John 5 says, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (v. 13).

“You shall call his name Jesus” the angel said to Joseph, and, by implication, to you and me. Not everyone likes the name Jesus. King Herod certainly didn’t. He saw Jesus as a threat to his throne. The Roman Emperors didn’t like it either. The earliest creed of those who followed Jesus was just four words long, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” And if Jesus Christ is Lord, that means the emperor is not. That’s a problem, because the emperors rather liked the idea of being called Lord and treated as little deities on earth. The Christians wouldn’t play along with the charade, and so the Roman Empire fiercely persecuted the early Christians.

Still today, Christians around the world are molested and oppressed and even killed for confessing the name Jesus. For if Jesus is Lord, by implication that means Allah is not. If Jesus is Lord, that means Kim Jong-un is not. If Jesus is Lord, that means the Central Committee of the Communist Party is not. If Jesus is Lord, then we must obey *him* rather than man.

Friends, don’t be afraid to use the name Jesus. If our

brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are risking life and limb to confess the name Jesus, surely we can withstand the sniveling reproach from those in our own culture who do not like the name Jesus.

Sometimes in the hospital room, especially when we're dying, it's the name Jesus we most need to hear, not a long theological treatise on the problem of human suffering and death, but just the simple truth: "Jesus loves you. Jesus died for you. This won't last forever. Jesus is preparing a home in heaven for you."

Sometimes the name Jesus is what we most need to hear when beaten down by the guilt of our sin, not a long psychological treatise on why we did what we did, but just the simple truth: Jesus died for you, for the forgiveness of your sins.

"Give him the name Jesus" the angel said, "for he will save his people from their sins." This time of the year we hear a lot about the vague notions of peace and joy and love, but there wouldn't be any of that if not for the specific and unambiguous name Jesus.

Without the name Jesus there is every danger that our conception of the love of God in that infant in Bethlehem will become soft and sentimental. But the name Jesus given that infant lying in a manger describes what he came to do. He came not just to be another teacher, another prophet. He came to save all people from their sins.

That happens on the cross, and that cross brings home the appalling cost of God's love and forgiveness. God does not simply say, "Never mind," to the sinner, pretending it never happened or that it's of no significance. True forgiveness involves facing and recognizing the great pain and distress caused by the offense, and the cross sets forward the full and tremendous cost of real forgiveness. We call him Jesus because he became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place *and gave him the name that is above every name*, so that *at the name of Jesus* every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” (vv.9-11).

Let’s do that this Christmas, shall we, you and me: bow before the name of Jesus, confess the name, use the name Jesus, call on the name, and most of all trust that because his name is Jesus, he has saved us from our sins and given us life and salvation. Amen.

