

Luke 1:26-35

**What's in a name?** Your last name is usually determined by your parents' last name and involves little choice. But your first name usually bears much significance because parents choose it. When I count to 3, I want everyone to say your first name. (1-2-3-\_\_\_\_) You may be named after a relative, friend, or even for a geographical location, for a hero or a saint or just because the name sounded good to your parents. Still, some names seem peculiar.

Tonsillitis Jackson joined the Navy. The Navy couldn't believe his name was Tonsillitis. When they verified it they discovered not only was Tonsillitis Jackson his name, he had siblings whose names were Meningitis, Appendicitis, Peritonitis and Laryngitis (or just Larry for short).

Englebert Humperdink—now there's a one of a kind name. You won't find that name in every telephone book across the nation. But you will find James Smith in nearly every phone book. Our friend, Jim Smith, has gone to a convention held every year just for persons named James Smith. There are hundreds who attend.

The study of names and their affect on a person's life is fascinating. I have a "name" book here that you are welcome to come up after the service and look up the meaning of your name. I learned David means "beloved."

What's in a name? Certainly **tradition** or history. Most of us, whether we like it or not, bear the tradition of our family names. We hear, "So and so was an important person in our family and you were named after them."

There is also **identity**, or the qualities of a person, in a name. We say a good name is important. If you do well, your name will be respected. Conversely, if you bear a respected name you are expected to do well.

Sometimes names are changed. A new name is chosen because it better identifies who that person thinks he or she is now. This happened frequently in the Bible. Abram became Abraham when he received the covenant. Jacob became Israel when he wrestled with God. Simon became Peter when he received the commission. Saul became Paul when his life turned around on the Damascus Road. Each new name marked a transformation and announced: here is a different person.

Sometimes a name's real tradition and identity are confused or forgotten. David McCasland tells how a survey of visitors at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida revealed that many of the park's guests under the age of 15 didn't know that Walt Disney was a real person. They thought that "Disney" was just a company name. When corporate officials planned the celebrations commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Walt Disney's birth, they made a special effort to highlight the life and impact of the real man.

With today being the first Sunday of Advent, we need to think about how we can celebrate the birth of Jesus that will help people of all ages know Jesus lived on this earth as a real man with a real purpose. In the pure and simple story of the nativity we don't want to forget **why** it all happened. The answer is found in the tradition and identity of a name.

Today's scripture text from the Gospel of Luke tells of an angel's surprising announcement. It's called **THE ANNUNCIATION**: "In the sixth month, God sent the

angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.... The angel said to Mary, **'You will be with child and give birth to a son.'**" Then Luke says Gabriel named the baby, **"You are to give him the name Jesus."**

What's in a name? Jesus had many names and titles that described His mission and ministry. Here is a poster listing the many names others gave to Jesus referring to who he was and what he did. (Name three or four). Come and look at this after the service. But, "Jesus" was His given name, the one on his birth record. Even more than we today, the ancient Jews chose names because of the meaning of the name itself and also because of the tradition and identity associated with the name. **Jesus is the Greek form of the Jewish name "Joshua" which means "Savior" or "God saves" or "God shall save us from our sins."** So, if this baby is to be named Jesus, or Joshua, we need to look at the historical Joshua.

To find Joshua's story, we have to go way back to the Exodus, the Jewish liberation from Egyptian slavery and the establishment and fulfillment of their life in the Promised Land. The two most important people then were Moses and Joshua. Moses began the Exodus, but Joshua finished it.

Moses died an old man, short of entering the Promised Land. It was Joshua who led God's people into the fulfillment of God's promise.

So when the angel says, "You are to give him the name Jesus," meaning Joshua, the name tells us who He is and what He will do. He is our Savior. He will save us from our sin and He will lead us into the eternal life that is the fulfillment of God's promise.

If we don't get the message from the name itself, Gabriel goes on to foretell that this Jesus "will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Clearly, this is not a baby just for Mary. Isaiah writes, **"For unto US a child is born, unto US a son is given."** (Isaiah 9:6) God is doing something mysterious and miraculous here. It's for real and it's for everyone. Mary, herself, says, "I am but the handmaid of the Lord," a servant to accomplish the Lord's purpose.

Which brings me to this point. No one owns their children. Whenever I baptize a child I am reminded, our children do not belong to us. They belong to God. Children are visitors in our homes for a time. Our parental vocation is to be God's servant in helping to prepare a life to find its God-ordained fulfillment and purpose. All parents have a legal, moral and spiritual responsibility to train, guide and care for these little people until they can care for themselves. Then we must let them go.

The same was true for Mary and Joseph. The difference is in what the God-ordained plan was for Mary's son. He was to be the One who would free us from our slavery to sin and the penalty of sin, which is separation from God.

Pat had an interesting experience some time ago, maybe one you can identify with. She was trying to e-mail our nephew and the mail kept being returned because some part of the address was not correct. She tried 4 different ways of writing the address before she finally got it to go through. The problem? She forgot a "dot" between his first

and last name. A small thing, but in the computer's "logic" it was enough to reject her communication. It had to be perfect.

However, the reality of human living is, no matter how hard we try, we can never get everything about ourselves right. We can't be perfect. We sin. We don't always put God first and we often choose to do things that are less loving to others and more self-centered.

**But, the Good News of Christmas is two-fold:**

- 1) **It's not our perfection that will get us successfully through this life and into the next, but His.**
- 2) **It's not our goodness, but God's gift of grace and forgiveness that brings us into the presence of a holy and righteous God.**

That was the plan from the beginning.

I am fascinated with the popularity of Christmas. Why is it even some of the most secular people of our time are moved with deep emotion by this festival of hope and joy? They can't bring themselves to recite the creeds of our Christian faith, but they will sing the carols of Christmas, which are creeds in song, like: "Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love's pure light; Radiant beams from thy holy face, With the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord at thy birth." That's a creed, a faith affirmation of who Jesus is.

Perhaps the reason we are moved with emotion and let our defenses down at Christmas is because the deepest longings in each of us are addressed and hope is given. We know we are not yet the way we should be and the world is not yet as God created it to be. **We can't find peace, goodwill, and reconciliation with others until we know we are loved and accepted and forgiven.** That assurance is what the birth and the name of Jesus are all about.

Max Lucado expresses it in a wonderful way in his book, In the Grip of Grace. He writes:

"Untethered by time, God sees us all. From the backwoods of Virginia to the business district of London.... He saw us before we were born.

And he loves what he sees. Flooded by emotion. Overcome by pride, the Starmaker turns to us, one by one, and says, 'You are my child. I love you dearly. I'm aware that someday you'll turn from me and walk away. But I want you to know, I've already provided a way back.'

And to prove it, he did something extraordinary.

Stepping from the throne, he removed his robe of light and wrapped himself in ...human skin. The light of the universe entered a dark womb and was birthed into a cold night, and then slept on cow's hay.

Mary didn't know whether to give him milk or give him praise, but she gave him both since he was, as near as she could figure, hungry and holy.

Joseph didn't know whether to call him Junior or Father. But in the end he called him Jesus, since that's what the angel had said. ....

Don't you think...their minds wondered, 'What in the world are you doing, God?' Or, better phrased, 'God, what are you doing in the world?'

(But God asks,) 'Can anything make me stop loving you? Watch me speak your language, sleep on your earth, and feel your hurts....

'You wonder, how long my love will last? Find your answer on a splintered cross, on a craggy hill. That's me you see up there, your maker, your God, nail-stabbed and bleeding....

'That's your sin I'm feeling. That's your death I'm dying. That's your resurrection I'm living. That's how much I love you.' "

Max has a beautiful way with words. But I ask you, did you hear—who did God do all this for? At the count of three, say your name aloud again. (1,2,3, \_\_\_\_). God did it for you and for me. Our individual traditions and identities make each name and each person special to God. Even in our imperfection God sent us a gift of love. All we have to do is tell God we accept it. We don't have to find God. God has found us. Christmas is the story of how God did it.

**Rejoice!! Give thanks! For unto us a child is born.**

**His name is ... Jesus.**