

Philippians 2:1-11

Matthew 1:18-25

December 14, 2014

Third Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THERE'S JUST SOMETHING ABOUT THAT NAME

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When last Sunday's worship service was over, after I had read Matthew's "account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham," with its forty-seven names, someone said to me, "Congratulations! You did a good job pronouncing all of those names!" He said it as a joke, because I had once observed to the session, when worship leaders were worried about how to pronounce names in the Bible, "Well, do you think too many people are going to notice if you *mis*pronounce the names?" Then, this week, someone else said, "I sure am glad God gave Joseph, Mary, and Jesus names that are easy to remember and pronounce, since we talk about them so much!"

According to www.babycenter.com, the ten most popular names for baby boys in the United States in 2014 are (in descending order): Liam, Noah, Ethan, Mason, Logan, Lucas, Jacob, Aiden, Jackson, and Jack. In 2013, Joseph ranked #20 on the "most popular name" list, while Mary came in at #121. The annual list is generated from BabyCenter's own database and records from the U.S. Government's Social Security Administration.

While the name Jesus (or Jesús) ranked #33 on the list of the 100 most popular Hispanic names for baby boys in 2013 (between Bruno and Jorge), Jesus (Jesús) was at #78 among all names in 2009, only to fall in popularity every year since, coming in at #106 in 2013.¹

*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
There's just something about that name
Master, Savior, Jesus
Like the fragrance after the rain
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
Let all heaven and earth proclaim
Kings and kingdoms shall all pass away
But there's something about that name*

The name "Jesus" is not an uncommon name, either then or now. So, what is special about *this* name "Jesus"? One day, Peter and John were speaking to the people in Jerusalem about Jesus. The religious authorities were "much annoyed" because Peter and John were "proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead." The authorities arrested them. The next day, they brought Peter and John before the

rulers, elders, scribes, and high priest and his family who were assembled in Jerusalem and demanded to know, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (They had healed a man who had been lame from birth.) Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said, “Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth . . . There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:1-12)

Today’s gospel story is something of a follow-up/extension of last week’s “account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” By listing the forty-two generations from Abraham to Jesus, who is called the Messiah, Matthew sends the strong and clear message that Jesus is descended from David, he is “the son of David.” In today’s story, an angel of the Lord calls *Joseph* “son of David.” Joseph is the only person other than Jesus who is called “son of David” in the gospels, and only in this one place.

Joseph never says a word in this story, yet he plays a key role in the birth of Jesus, even though he had nothing to do with the baby’s conception or birth. In the long list of “begats” in Matthew 1:1-17, Joseph stands out: he had no biological role in Jesus’ birth, and he is listed as “the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” (1:16)

However, we find out that Joseph is “a righteous man,” not only in how he treats Mary, but in how he receives the angel’s message and how he obeys God. An angel of the Lord told Joseph in a dream, “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus.” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. When Mary gave birth to a son, Joseph named him Jesus.

Ten years ago I preached a sermon on Matthew 1:1-25. The sermon title was “Why Not Joseph, Jr.?” Here is part of what I said then: “Today’s gospel lesson is full of names and titles: Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham, Emmanuel, God-with-us, not to mention the forty-seven names listed in the genealogy. With all of those names available for use, what is it about the name ‘Jesus’? When it comes to naming this baby in Matthew’s Christmas story, why not Joseph, Jr.? The story tells us that Joseph was a good and righteous man, obedient to God’s will for his life and for his family. So, why not Joseph, Jr.? If not Joseph, Jr., then why not name the baby after another of his illustrious ancestors? For instance, someone like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or David — giants of the faith. Or even someone like Hezekiah, whose kingship was remembered as a high mark in Judah’s history; or Josiah, who rebuilt the temple and reformed the kingdom according to God’s law; or Zerubbabel, who led the people of God back from their exile in Babylon, laid the foundations for the new temple and was thought by many to be the Messiah. The simplest answer to the question “Why not Joseph, Jr.?” is this: God named the baby and God said his name would be Jesus. That’s what God intended, for a very special reason.”

Most parents probably put a lot of thought into what they will name their baby boy or baby girl. Maybe they pick a family name to honor a grandparent or favorite

aunt or uncle. Sometimes a boy will even be IV or V. Maybe the parents pick a name that has no family significance, but because they like the name. But how many parents give much thought to **what** the name they pick for their child actually means?

How many of you know what your name means? Just for fun and to illustrate the meaning of Matthew's story about God and Joseph naming the baby boy Jesus, I looked up the meanings of the names of some folks who come to Bible study on Wednesday mornings. Without revealing their given names (you know who you are!), let me tell you that the meanings ranged from "God is gracious" to "foreign woman/strange/wild." Other meanings included "pure/clear/innocent; valiant protector; captivating; healthy; rival; and Jewess/woman from Judea." Unfortunately, I couldn't find the meaning of one person's name.

Our names are significant for at least two reasons: (1) Your name identifies you as an individual. You may share your name with many other people, but it's still **your** name, and (2) Your name may honor an ancestor or end up being passed down after you. Biblical names share those two traits, but also say something about what kind of person bears the name and what that person is meant to do. For instance, after God makes a covenant with Abram that includes descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky, his name is changed to Abraham, "father of a multitude." When Abraham and Sarah have a boy when they are both well beyond the age, their son was named Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah laughed when she got the news about having a baby. God's got a sense of humor! Isaac's son, Jacob, was a trickster and something of a rogue, and that's what Jacob means — "he supplants." Jacob was always looking for a way to beat out his twin brother, Esau. After he wrestled with a man all night long and finally received a blessing, Jacob became Israel, which means "strive with God."

I'm not sure the meanings of names always have such importance today. My name — Philip — is from the Greek for "lover of horses." When people ask me, "Do you love horses?" I always say, "Well, I don't have anything in particular against them!"

But why Jesus? Because in this baby God is doing a new thing. According to the angel's command, Joseph names the baby Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins." As I said earlier, Jesus (Jesús) is not an uncommon name, either in our own day or in the first century A.D. In that sense, we might say that the name Jesus is an expression of our Lord's shared humanity with us. On the other hand, this name Jesus, given by God, is no accident. Jesus' birth, the coming of the Messiah in Bethlehem, was not a genetic accident or a coincidence of birth, but God working in history to fulfill his promise in the fullness of time. This Jesus lives up to his name. He alone is the Son of God. He alone is the Lord. He alone is the one who brings salvation.

"Jesus" is the Greek shortened form of another common Hebrew name, Joshua, which means "The Lord is salvation." Already at the beginning of his gospel, Matthew shows us the path that this little baby boy will take and the mission he will fulfill in his life and in his death. How ironic it is when the chief priests, along with the scribes and elders, mock this same Jesus as he hangs on the cross, when they say, "He saved oth-

ers; he cannot save himself.” (Mt. 27:42) How wonderful that God “gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11) How true is what Peter preached to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

Matthew’s Christmas story also talks about Jesus as Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. At the very end of the gospel — literally the last verse — when Jesus sends his disciples out on their mission, he promises them, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

(Mt. 28:20) When we sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” during Advent, we know that God has already come among us in a baby named Jesus “who will save his people from their sins.” We know that God-is-with us even now. We trust that this same Jesus, whom God has exalted and given the name that is above every name, will come again, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Jesus — Joshua — “God saves” — Emmanuel — God with us. It’s true that not everyone who speaks the name of Jesus does so with reverence and praise. You hear people say “Jesus Christ!” or “Jesus!” or “Jesus H. Christ!” and you know they’re not invoking “the name that is above every name . . . to the glory of God the Father.” Let me share an story I came across that puts an interesting spin on the name of Jesus and the promise of

God-with-us in all of our humanity. “A student was telling about his summer working as a volunteer in a Jesuit home for the poor in the center of one of our nation’s most blighted cities. They worked all day, every day, handing out food, ministering to the human need as best they could. One particularly difficult, long day was drawing to a close. He and an old Jesuit finally took care of the last person in need and were pushing the big oak door closed for the night when they looked out and saw yet one more forlorn soul shuffling his way up the sidewalk toward the center. The student looked out at the man shuffling toward them, thought of how tired he was, and muttered, “Jesus Christ . . .” The old Jesuit said, “Could be, could be. We had better open the door.”²

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus . . . there’s just something about that name.

Let us pray: God of new beginnings, you have drawn near to us in Jesus Christ, who became one of us. You have drawn near to us to strengthen and renew us. Lord, kindle in us the fire of your Spirit. May your light so shine through us that all may welcome your Son at his coming. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us. Amen.

NOTES

¹ www.babycenter.com for all of this information about baby names.

² Rev. Marc Sherrod, “Divided Attention,” www.bethelpcusa.org.