

It's all in the Names

“The Child in the Manger – The True Meaning of Christmas”

December 31, 2017

The more we do something, the more we take it for granted. Even something like celebrating Christmas, the more we do it, the more we just take it for granted and we lose perspective of what it is really all about. Especially when it takes place in a capitalistic society and culture which in many ways has high-jacked Christmas and has made it about things that really have nothing to do with Christmas.

But there are many things that happen a lot more often than celebrating Christmas once a year. There is something that happens on an hourly basis in every country in the world. In fact it takes place about 250 times every minute. Any guesses? It is the birth of a baby! The birth of a baby happens so often and in a country like the United States, with all its advancements in medicine over the past century, is something that we pretty much take for granted, including the health of the baby being born. Because it happens so often and for the vast majority the baby is often safe and healthy, we even lose sense of just how miraculous the birth of a baby boy or baby girl really is.

There is also something that happens just as often as a baby boy or baby girl being born and that is the naming of the baby. Whether the parents are rich or poor, highly intelligent or much more simplistic, eastern or western, white, black or somewhere in between, there is one decision that must be made. In fact in the western world it is illegal not to do it. It is what makes the baby's birth legal. The baby needs to have a name!

It is usually the first thing that we inquire about after asking “is it a boy or a girl and is the baby and mom healthy and alright?” It outweighs virtually every other decision. It will mark a son or a daughter for life. For the rest of their days they will react to the one word (or maybe two). From one point of view it seems rather trivial – how important are a few letters after all? Yet, it is the big question: “What name?”

For some parents it is a very painstaking decision. They want to pick just the right name. Perhaps it has to do with what their hopes and dreams for the child are. For others it might have to do with important people in their lives – parents, grandparents, especially those who have gone on before us. Or maybe it has to do with a name that has been passed down in the family for generations. A junior, or a third or fourth.

For some it's a cartoon character or a name from a movie the parents really liked. Without much thought about what the name might mean for the baby's future they pick a name which sounds cute for a baby. A while back a pastor friend of mine had a grandson who was about to name his first great grandson a name that sounded good for a young boy, but as an adult would give people preconceived ideas about his nature that might not have been so positive. My pastor friend agonized about it before finally telling his grandson out of love for him and his baby boy to be born his concerns. I can tell you that initially it didn't go well, but when the baby boy was born, he wasn't named “Maverick.”

For us as humans, that just might be both the most important and the most imponderable question when naming our children: “will the name suit the child when he or she grows up?” After all we do so having absolutely no idea what the child is going to be like when he or she grows up. Well, naming the child born in the manger in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago was pretty straightforward:

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:²³ “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).
Matthew 1:18-25 (NIV)

When Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. Not only was Joseph commanded by God to take Mary as his wife, not only was he commanded by God to be the father of her baby son – that which he had not conceived, he was also commanded by God to give him the name Jesus. Joseph was commanded by God to give up everything that a father in the day had the privilege and responsibility of doing. It was all taken away from him by God. Joseph was even told by the angel why he should call him Jesus, “because he will save his people from their sins.” From the very beginning of his life, even long beforehand, the child born in the manger had a divinely given destiny. It was matched by his divinely given name, Jesus, the LORD saves.

Most of us at some point in our lives discover why our parents gave us our name. I say most because I have no idea why my parents gave me my name – Richard Alan. I assume that it was because they liked the sound. I have no relatives who lived before me with either of those names.

You would think that at some point in his young life Jesus most likely inquired about why his parents named him that, though Jesus was a popular name in the day. But even if Jesus didn’t inquire, fairly early in his life, his mom and dad must have told him why they named him Jesus, especially with all the events surrounding his birth. He needed to know that his name was not the choice of his parents. God had chosen it for him because he was God’s chosen one. And God had planned his destiny – “call him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” At what point Jesus came to know this and when he was able to accept it as his own, is one of the great mysteries.

But as he became older he became increasingly aware of God’s timetable for his life. Even at the age of 12 when he stayed behind in the temple in Jerusalem and his parents had to scurry back and find him, his reply to them: “Why were you searching for me, didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” As his three year ministry began around the age of 30, Jesus was quite

aware of the time, and even the hour approaching – the hour when he would have to fulfill God’s plan for him by dying on the cross. At the wedding feast in Cana when his mother tells him to turn the water into wine, and elsewhere, Jesus is quoted as saying at “not yet, my time has not yet come,” because he knows that when it starts, when more and more people start knowing who he really is, his time left here on earth is very limited.

At what point Jesus knew that his name was divinely chosen for him by God his father because he was chosen for a specific task – going to the cross to save his people from their sins – we don’t know for sure, but we do know that by the time he began his ministry, which is what the vast majority of the four gospel accounts are all about (with the exception of the brief infancy account in Matthew and Luke), he was sure his name was Jesus and why!

While Jesus, like His Father, went by many names (like Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace) only one of them perfectly fit him – Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins.

We began our Advent & Christmas series this year, “The Child in the Manger ...” – back on the first Sunday of December talking about Joseph. The angel of the Lord had already told Mary what the baby’s name was going to be, and then he told Joseph in a dream. Not only was Joseph told to take Mary as his wife and to adopt the baby boy she was about to give birth to (though he had nothing to do with conceiving that child), he would have to accept him by faith as the Son of God, the Savior of the world. As much as Mary is credited with great faith, God had also done something remarkable in the life of Joseph. In the midst of deep disturbance in his own life, to say the least, he trusted in God’s word and he committed himself to trusting that the little boy was indeed the long awaited Savior. So when he named him Jesus, not only was he saying, “I am accepting you as my son during my life here on earth,” but he was also saying “I believe and am trusting that you are also the Savior God promised to send us.”

It is very significant that Joseph named his son, Jesus. It is just as significant for every single one of us. Naming his son, Jesus, was the proof that Joseph believed and accepted Jesus as the only his source of salvation. Believing in the name Jesus and accepting him as the only source of our salvation is the only thing that saves us from our sins.

Jesus’ name fits him perfectly. During his ministry here on earth Jesus saved people from the crippling effects of sin. And then on the cross he dealt with sin itself – its guilt and shame, its dominion and power. Jesus’ name fit him perfectly. The converted slave trader, John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, knew it. These are words from another of his hymns:

- *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer’s ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals the wounds,
And drives away his fear.*
- *It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled beast;
‘Tis manna to the hungry soul
And to the weary, rest.*
- *Dear name! the rock on which I build,*

*My shield and hiding place,
My never-failing treasury filled
With boundless stores of grace.
- Jesus, My shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest and King,
My Lord, my Life, My way, My End
Accept my praise I bring.*

The converted Christian persecutor Saul, who became the apostle Paul, knew it:

Jesus:

⁶ *Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

His name is Jesus, which means God saves, because He has come to save his people from their sins. When someone bows down to His name he or she not only acknowledges that He is their Savior, but also their Lord.

John the Baptist knew his name – “Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

So, what name do you call Him and do you bow down to His name? And has your name changed? There was a time, and many still do it today, when a Christian became a Christian he or she changed their name to signify that he or she had been reborn and had taken on a new identity as a Christian – hence Saul became the apostle Paul, Simon became Peter. Roman Catholics take on a new middle name at their confirmation. But maybe our name doesn't really

need to be changed, because the bottom line is, no matter what name our parents chose to call us when we were first born, it really means nothing apart from our life here on earth. Maybe, the name used for the primary character of John Bunyan's Christian classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, should be the name of all of us followers of Jesus, that name being simply "Christian." Or Leo the Great, a Catholic Pope who lived around 450 A.D., who is best known for helping to formulate the Christian doctrine of Jesus' incarnation, "God with us," that which we celebrate each Christmas, addressed followers of Jesus in his writings not by their given name at birth but by the name Christian. This was from one of his Christmas sermons:

"Christian, remember your dignity . . . Dearly beloved, today our Savior is born; let us rejoice. . .

Let us throw off our old nature and all its ways and, as we have come to birth in Christ, let us renounce the works of the flesh.

Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom."

"Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." While God's son has many names, it is the name Jesus – the Lamb of God who takes away our sin which holds priority in our lives as Christians. It is the name that the angel of the Lord told both Mary and Joseph to name him and why.

As I said at the beginning of my message, there are some things that we can do so often that we forget the significance of it. Celebrating communion is one of those things. Celebrating communion is ultimately about acknowledging what God has done for us in Jesus Christ – offering us the gift of salvation in His name! When we come to the table we acknowledge that we have accepted Jesus by His name and everything which that entails – the He is the Son of God, born of the virgin Mary, became man, suffered on the cross, died and was raised to new life, for all those who choose to repent from their sinfulness and to accept him both as Savior and Lord, to call him Jesus and to bow down to His name, not just for our sake, but for *the glory of God the Father*.