



From the Pulpit

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"What's in a Name?"
Matthew 1: 18-24

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." (Matthew 1: 18-24)

The story of the birth of Jesus is a familiar one. Sometimes it seems so familiar that I stop noticing the details. This year, the detail that stuck in my mind was the significance of Jesus' name. An angel appears to Joseph and not only tells him to marry Mary but also tells him what to name her child. Why was that so important? What is in a name?

Like the famous line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet, the star-crossed lovers are members of two feuding families. Juliet says to Romeo "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Juliet claims that a name is meaningless and that she loves the person who is called "Montague", not the Montague name. This one short line captures the central struggle and tragedy of the play. Contrary to Juliet's statement, in the end a name is very important. For Romeo and Juliet what was in a name was a family conflict that would lead to tragedy and despair. Names matter.

In our story for today, the name Jesus is also very powerful, but because it holds hope and salvation. The name Jesus is a transliteration of the Hebrew name "Joshua". Joshua means "God is salvation." So Jesus' name means savior or "God Saves." In the scripture from the gospel of Matthew he is also called Messiah and Emmanuel. Messiah literally means "anointed one" a person who is "specially appointed and empowered". Originally this phrase the "anointed one" referred to a king who was anointed with Holy oil as part of his coronation ceremony. The name of "Christian" refers to the Greek word for 'Messiah': which is Khristos. Christians commonly refer to Jesus as the "Christ" which also means the "Messiah." I can't tell you how many times the kids in youth group ask if Christ is Jesus' last name and it's easy to see how they get confused.

Emmanuel is a Hebrew name meaning God with us. It appears only once in the Christian New Testament: in Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 7:14 that we read today. The Gospel of Matthew expressly identifies the name Emmanuel with Jesus the Messiah, and Christian tradition has continued to affirm this connection. The fact that Jesus was called Messiah and Emmanuel is important. The hoped for savior would not be a normal person but would be holy, special, God present in our world.

So why was this baby born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago given such weighty names? I was curious and so I delved into the history of the time. Bear with me because we're going to have a little bit of a history lesson here to gain a better understanding. Jesus was a Palestinian Jew, and so we can learn a lot about him and his name by studying Jewish history leading up to his life. Jewish history is full of stories about conquest and oppression. There were many waves of foreign domination; a long line of invasions, beginning with the Babylonians in 586 BCE destroying the temple, then the Persians and the Greeks, leading up to the Roman occupation of Israel in 63 BCE. The Jewish people were more often the victims than the victors in their fight for national sovereignty. This victimization is seen as the soil out of which a desire for a Messiah grew and gives us the historical background for why the Jewish people started to long for a savior who would restore them as a people.

In particular, hopes for a Messiah surfaced prominently after the Babylonian invasion and destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E.. When the Babylonians invaded they deported 10,000 Jews and Judah ceased to be an independent kingdom. The Jewish people found themselves without a homeland, without a state, and without a nation. This period is known as the Exile. In the writing from the time of the Exile we can see that biblical figures began to articulate a yearning for the Messiah, one anointed and empowered to bring a new rule. The Jews wanted a return to the Davidic kingship and Israelite national independence that a new strong ruler would create. This began as a real hope that there would be a leader to bring about an actual change in their circumstances. Over time, as a return to independent rule became increasingly unachievable, hopes for a new "anointed one" to come and liberate the people from their current, dire conditions took on a more transcendental tone, eventually developing into the idea of a more spiritual "Messiah", the Divine messenger who will come and bring a new

age of God's reign and presence in the world. Their belief in a future savior gave them hope in the midst of very difficult circumstances. In a way, this hope for a Messiah became a coping mechanism and it provided them with strength to endure and persevere in the midst of great challenges by imagining the glory that was to come.

As we can see, when Jesus came on the scene and was given such a powerful name as "God Saves" there were many different expectations and historical projections that were wrapped up in naming him. At the time of Jesus' birth, Israel had spent centuries dealing with oppression, and most recently they had suffered under Roman rule, and so at that point they had high expectations for a savior. Some say it was inevitable that Jesus was looked upon by many as the one for whom the people had been waiting.

Christianity emerged around the year 30 AD as a movement among Jews and their Gentile converts who believed that Jesus was the Messiah they had been hoping for and that they needed to spread that message. Theologian John Shea in his book *An Experience Named Spirit* brought up the question of whether or not Jesus himself knew he was Jesus the Christ and not just an ordinary person. He asks this because in his studies, he found that Jesus never called himself Christ and it is difficult to tell if Jesus used any other titles for himself. Although Jesus may not have claimed to be the Christ, people who encountered him and were transformed by their experiences with him were eager to call him Jesus Christ and spread the news that the Messiah had come.

Scholars believe that it is highly probable that Jesus did understand himself as the one the Jews had been waiting for whose purpose was to inaugurate 'God's reign' on earth. Jesus did not think of the reign of God in either narrow political terms as establishing a new political regime or in the dramatic terms of the literal destruction of the universe. For Jesus, bringing about the reign of God was linked to a new experience of God's presence in the here-and-now. His words and actions were aimed at making justice, mercy and love real in the world. He also stressed that human beings must respond to God's invitation and choose to change and to embark on a new way of living if the reign of God is to become real.

People did not come to believe overnight that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior. It took years, decades, centuries of Jesus' followers working to convince people that Jesus was the one. Even today it is part of the mission of many churches to spread the "Good News" of Jesus as our Savior. Those who had actual contact with Jesus and were touched by his ministry were transformed. This transformation led them to claim him as Lord and Savior, the center of their lives. It also compelled them to share the message that had so changed them with others. Decade after decade, century after century people lived their faith and let it lead their lives. Through this tradition of sharing the message of Jesus' transforming power and love, history has carried the living Christian faith through the generations to us and we can come to know Jesus through the stories of old,

but we also have the opportunity to claim Jesus the Christ as Savior in our own lives now.

It is only by entering into Jesus' story that we can hope to understand the mystery of who he is and what he means for us today. I have shared historical information with you today but in my heart I know that if we stand at a scholarly distance we may never really know the power that the Christian faith has to offer us and has provided for generations before us. It is not history that keeps faith alive and meaningful. It is the combination of the stories of old and the way that faith has been lived by each person that keeps the flame burning. To stand within this 'living Jesus tradition' means that we must attempt to reinterpret his meaning for us today. Our interpretation must be both faithful to the history while also being creative in the way that we re-express our Christian faith in the here and now based on our own experiences. It is helpful and important to know the background for how Jesus came to be called the Messiah, but we cannot simply study and repeat the past. It is up to each of us to keep the Jesus-story alive through faithful discipleship, our own actions, words and interpretation. And so although it meant something much different to the early Christians to call Jesus the Messiah, Christ, Savior, Emmanuel, it is still a powerful part of our shared history and our living faith. It is our turn to call these names, to search and discover, to claim Jesus' meaning and power in our own lives.

We are no longer an oppressed people. We are not looking for a new king. We have mastered the art of self reliance and don't appear to need saving. Theologian Gerard Hall poses the question "is it meaningful for human beings today to believe in the story of Jesus the Messiah that has been handed down to us? Is our search to understand the significance of Jesus in our lives anything more than mythology? Or as Christian faith claims, could our belief in Jesus be the answer to our deepest human longings for peace, justice and love?" Jesus' name can hold as much power for us today as it did 2,000 years ago. I think we still need saving. How in your own life do you understand and claim Jesus as Christ, Lord and Savior? It is my hope that you will take on this question with renewed interest and energy and find how your living faith will inspire you to find the meaning for calling Jesus the Christ, your savior in your life here and now. Amen.