

Remember the Name!
Matthew 1:18-25

In my profession it pays to remember names. I think I am fairly adept at picking up names in conversation and calling them up when I need to do so. I do have two or three blank spots. There is a lady in town whose name is Patti. I greeted her once as "Debbie." No one corrected me at first. My second offense was embarrassing. To this day when I see her I think "Patti" and say "Debbie." Spare myself a lot of apologies when I remember.

The angels in the birth stories in Matthew and Luke were pretty insistent that the people involved get the names right. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and informed him that he and Elizabeth would have a son, he said pointedly, "You are to name him John." Partly because of his surprise and astonishment and partly because he had always wanted a son to whom he could give his own name, Zechariah was unable to speak until the child's circumcision and naming. Zechariah wrote, "His name is John." The name was important. Zechariah means "Jehovah has remembered." John means "Jehovah has-been gracious."

The angel who visited Joseph in his dream to talk about the approaching birth of the child of Joseph and Mary was even more forceful. The statement to Joseph is a strong imperative: "You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." The name was predictive, for Jesus means "God saves."

Names carry great meaning. In ancient times names were given as a hope for the child or the clan or to describe some personal characteristic. Abram's name meant "Father is high"; he became Abraham, "Father of the faithful." His son was called Isaac which literally meant "laughter." (Remember Sarah's laughter when the birth of a son was foretold.) Jacob was so named because he "supplanted" his twin brother Esau; he earned the name Israel (One who strives with God) after his struggle with God.

I smile each time I read the story of Isaiah and his wife coming up with names for their sons. The first was called Jezebel which meant “Godsons destruction.” I suspect that Isaiah was frustrated because no one paid attention to his sermons and he wanted a way to keep his message in the streets. The second child was named Lo-runaway or “no compassion.” The third was Lo-ammo which meant “not my people.” (I actually knew a man in Edgefield who used that for his common name.)

Modern names don't have meanings in particular, but they carry a sound we like or flatter us in some way. In a personal way I learned that new parents in our society need to use the name that a child is to be called first in the order. My name is James William. Every time I filled out a college form with first name and middle initial, I was called Jimmy. Sometimes I was too timid to correct professor so I had the name all semester. I started signing things J. William regardless of what the boxes called for. My mother called me Billy. In my senior year a new football coach said to me, “You don't look like a Billy; I'm going to call you Bill.”

Cathy's name is Cathy (not Catherine, as she says she would have liked) Jeanette (from her father's name John). She named her son Travis after third-grade child in her class whose name and spirit touched her. Linda and I named our first daughter Julianne Greigh. We were living in New Orleans at the time and the name had a good Creole sound we thought. Heather Lynn was chosen for our second child because Heather is a beautiful flower and the name went well with Harris. Lynn was included as a variation of Linda. Jamie Edna was named for me (James) and for her maternal grandmother.

Names become a part of us. Part of the way we think of ourselves has to-do with associations we form with our names. Often I wonder what Jesus thought about himself in terms of his name. Actually, Jesus was a common name. A lot of Jewish boys were called Jesus. The name referred to the hope the people had

for God's redemption. God would one day save his people, and he would do it, everyone thought, through some great deliverer such as Moses or David.

It was long after the time of Jesus that the stories of his birth were written. By that time the church had begun to grasp the wonder, the reality, and the mystery of the name Jesus. They added the term Savior, one who does save. And we have the chorus of the angels, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

We begin to put names together. We refer to Jesus Christ although that was his given name and surname. The Jesus means "God saves" and the Christ means "the anointed one" who brings salvation. So let's remember the name. Jesus the Christ is the Savior of the world. Let us hear the announcement again and let us rejoice.

What do we mean when we call Jesus Savior? We affirm that as Savior Jesus delivers us from evil, sin, and death. Salvation carries the idea of healing. Our word "salve" is related to it. But salvation is more than deliverance. Salvation is wholeness and completeness. Salvation means all-rightness with God. Our Savior makes us one with God.

In trying to say what the saving work of Jesus is, we refer first to what he has done. He has demonstrated the love of God and has given us an example of what life can become. We then move from the past tense to the present and say that Jesus is doing a great work within us through his living spirit. We are being saved. And we look to the future. Christ is leading us to full restoration and to total wellness. We shall be made whole!

The "we shall be made whole" part is something that we do not talk about sufficiently. I think it is true that salvation is already reality. Yes, I believe that all persons are already saved. But the meaning and joy of salvation come in an ongoing present, an "eternal present" one might call it. Jesus was a spirit person

who grasped what it meant to know God and to share the presence and power of God. His mission was to share that relationship and reality with us. So it's that we call Jesus our guide, our example, our model, and our brother!

In Jesus God chose to come as one onus to guide us, to show us the way, and to encourage us along the way we should go, to love us into becoming like him. That's astounding! But what power involved love can convey! Persons might see the need for salvation; they might even desire salvation; but without personal love and encouragement they remain helpless.

I enjoy the writings of Anne Morrow Lindbergh. She was able to describe events, feelings, and relationships in such a way as to make every part of life sacred. In her youth Anne Morrow was shy and delicate. Not dull or incompetent as many said, but timid. Her father was an ambassador to Mexico. There she met unadventurous young man who was visiting Mexico for the U. S. State Department. He flew from place to place promoting aviation. Everywhere he went he drew crowds. He had just won \$40,000 for being the first person to fly across the Atlantic. The dashing pilot and the shy young girl fell deeply in love.

When she became Mrs. Charles Lindbergh, Anne could have lost her own personality. Her husband was a national hero, always in the limelight. Anne Morrow Lindbergh could have become a resentful recluse, a nameless face in a crowd of admirers. Instead, she became one of America's most popular authors. Her gifts blossomed. How and why? Because she loved and was loved.

Once she wrote: "To be deeply in love is, of course, a great liberating experience. Ideally, persons in love free each other to move in new and different worlds. I was no exception to that rule. The sheer fact of finding me loved was unbelievable and it changed my world, my feelings about life, and my concept of myself. I was given confidence, strength, virtually a new character. Theban I married believed in me and in what I do, and consequently, I could found could do more than I ever realized."

I don't know of a better way than that to describe how Jesus saves and what salvation means. Look at some of the names we use. "Immanuel" means "God is with us." "Jesus" means "God saves." "Christ" refers to the chosen one who saves. How can we miss the point?

In Jesus God expresses God's love. That love shows us who we are, what we are able to become, who is giving strength for the journey. Remember the name. As we sometimes say, the name says I all.

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