



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Matthew 1:18-25

December 24, 2024 - 4:00 pm

Names Matter

When telling any story, names are important. They ground the narrative in reality and often the names give you a sense of the person's true character. For Charles Dickens, the names of his characters were a big part of his storytelling success. You can picture a scowling Mr. Bumble standing over the pot when Oliver Twist dares to ask for more gruel. You can sense the deviousness and cruelty present in the villain from David Copperfield named Uriah Heep. And what better description of a wizened old miser than one named Ebenezer Scrooge.

Names matter. That's why when Matthew wrote his gospel, he began with a genealogy, a list of names going from Abraham through King David and Solomon and finally ending with "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born." That's the first of two names Matthew records as being given to this special child - Jesus, or in Hebrew, Yeshua - which means "God saves."

Which begs the question: Saves us from what? The answer depends upon who you ask. Street corner preachers might insist Jesus saves us from the flames of hell. Some therapists may suggest that Jesus saves us from depression. Some Twelve Step group leaders may offer that Jesus saves us from addiction. Some medical workers may tell us that Jesus can heal us from disease. Agnostics and atheists may scoff and argue that they're doing just fine and don't need anyone to save them. Each of those options merits a sermon on its own, but Matthew offers his own answer. The angel told Joseph, "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." To sin means to miss the mark - to aim badly, like when an archer pulls back the string on a bow only to have the arrow miss the target altogether. Sin refers to bad things done and good things left undone; things that hurt, that make life colder and harder, that diminish the image of God in others or in ourselves.

There is no shortage of sinful things from which we need to be saved. It seems the things we shouldn't do are the very things we can't stop doing. So we repent of them in prayers of confession in church and in whispered words of contrition spoken only to God. We name our common brokenness in campaigns like #metoo or BlackLivesMatter. And by focusing on Jesus, we remember that we are not the ones to wipe the slate clean; he is. This gives us a measure of relief, but if we're honest, that knowledge alone is not enough. What about the next time we miss the mark? What about tomorrow's sins? And what about everyone else besides us - the world around us that needs saving?

That is precisely why Jesus is given a second name: Emmanuel, God-is-with-us. "God with us" is both a name and a promise. It is a title of reassurance, a description of a divine presence always beside us without expiration date and with no fine print in the agreement. If we wish to see what God is like, thanks to the incarnation, to the Christmas story, we can look to Jesus. God accommodated Godself so we could see, understand, and know that we are not alone.

The story is told about a group of friends who always went to the Christmas Eve service together, except for one friend who stayed home and read the paper. He was largely indifferent to religion and just didn't see the relevance of the story of a baby in a manger. While he was home, he heard a loud rap on the window and saw that a bird had flown hard into the glass. It was shivering and had plastic caught around one wing. When the man went out to try and help it, the bird kept hopping and fluttering in the snow beneath the thorn bushes near the house. Wanting to help yet seeing how the injured bird kept avoiding him, at one point the man yelled out in frustration, "Look, bird, can't you see that I'm trying to help you? If only you wouldn't keep flying away. If only I could become a bird and get you to understand." Just then the church bells rang – it was midnight on Christmas Eve, the sacred hour for the birth of the Christ child; and the man heard them ring and for the first time understood the incarnation for himself.

Names matter. Jesus – "God saves" – and Emmanuel – "God is with us." Saving us and being with us, wherever we are, however we find ourselves on this night or any night. The well-known verse from John 1 says "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In Eugene Peterson's The Message translation, it says "And the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." The names given to the Christ child at the beginning of Matthew's gospel are reinforced by the last thing Jesus says at the end of Matthew's gospel, when, as the risen Lord, he tells us directly, "I am with you always to the end of the age."

Each of us is called by many names – our given names and our Christian names. Names like "beloved" – spoken by the one God who dearly loves us. "Disciple" – spoken by the one we follow who is the way, the truth and the life. "Church" – spoken by the one who moved into our neighborhood for good. And on this night, we remember the Christmas names of Jesus and Emmanuel – the one who saves, the one who is with us. Names that truly matter. AMEN

December 24, 2024 – 7:00 pm

TEXT: Luke 2:1-14

The Incarnation Committee

Once upon a time, a long time ago, a committee meeting was held in heaven. It was a gathering of the Angel Cadets – the fresh recruits among the heavenly host who were

still earning their wings. It always amused and somewhat annoyed the higher-ranking cherubim that God took pleasure in seeking advice from these cadets. They were the misguided group that chose the size of the avocado pit and who convince the Packers to throw passes on third-down-and short yardage situations. Their skills of discernment were suspect at best.

As the Angel Cadets gathered together, St. Peter informed them that they were now a special Incarnation Committee. God had decided to descend to earth and wished to hear their opinions as to what form God should take for this event. It was a tough question. How should the eternal Lord appear on earth? For a while, no one spoke as the cadets sat in a circle nibbling on Doritos and Chex Mix. Finally Sylvia, the most organized member of the group, spoke up. "Let's list off some options" she said. "What are the main life forms on earth?" Like dutiful junior high students, the angels answered in unison, "Plant, animal, and mineral." Then some suggestions started.

"Maybe God should take the form of a sacred mountain – a place on earth of strength that all the nations could see." "Maybe God should become incarnate as a mighty tree, a towering redwood or a wide-branched oak." "Maybe God should come to earth as an animal that inspires, like a lion or soaring eagle."

Sylvia interrupted. "No, no, no. You've got to be more creative. Think outside the box. God's incarnation has to reflect God's eternal character and yet be in a form that is immediately understood by frail and finite mortals. Are there any other suggestions?"

After a pause, one cadet said "What about air? Air is necessary for all life and it can be found everywhere on earth. God is Spirit. Maybe God's return to earth could be like the time of earth's creation, when the *Ruach*, the Spirit of God moved over the face of the void and brought order out of chaos."

"No," another cadet said. "Air is too intangible. I propose water. It too is necessary for all life and can be found in lots of forms – rain from clouds, waves on ocean shores, ice on the tundra, streams rippling across the land." A third cadet broke in. "No, water is too fickle. It evaporates when you need it most; it floods when you need it least. I vote for bread. Bread is a symbol for all life-sustaining foods. It feeds and nourishes us and comes from the bounty of God's good earth." Vernon, an Angel Cadet Third Class, perked up when the subject shifted to food. "I vote for chocolate, since that's the real food of life." The other cadets quickly shushed him and told Vernon to get serious.

Other suggestions were made. "What about light? Light is pure and radiant. It chases away shadows and fear; it brings new energy and lifts spirits. Or what about being incarnate in words? Human beings rely on language to communicate what is most important; and since God's desire is to connect with them, why not choose something that could be translated in every language? Or how about music? It communicates

things deeper than words. It can be done in solo performances or by ensembles of all shapes and sizes. It can express the entire range of human experiences.”

Someone interrupted. “There’s a lot of pain and suffering on earth. What about having God become incarnate as teardrops? In moments of loss and death, God would be near at hand when someone was mourning and heavy of heart.” Someone else said, “Yes, but there’s also a lot of joy on earth. That fact can’t be neglected in God’s decision.” Vernon, daring to speak despite having a mouth full of Doritos, said, “My favorite sound is the music of children’s laughter.”

Just then, St. Peter cocked his head to one side, attentive to some inner voice speaking to him. Then he smiled and said, “Vernon, you’ll be pleased to know that God agrees with you. That is why God has chosen to be incarnate on earth in the form of a child. The most universal of all human experiences is that of birth itself; and the most common of all realities is the simple fact of living out a human life as a person of flesh and blood. God has decided to be incarnate by taking the form of a human being, so that people can grasp the fullness of God’s eternal love.”

“This decision has been made with a lot of thought and planning. By being incarnate as a human being, the cycle of birth, life, and death will be shown to be holy in all its stages. And by being incarnate in a particular human being, God will be located in space and time, so that the world will not think of God as some abstract, vague idea only for philosophers to muse about. God will walk on earth so that people will know they are not alone as they walk on earth. And most importantly, God will be love incarnate, since that reflects God’s deepest nature. Love involves being vulnerable and yes, open to pain and tears. But it mostly means being present for one another – available, comforting, supportive in every way. Therefore, God has chosen to be incarnate as a child, born to Mary and Joseph – a boy who will become a man, a teacher, a healer, a friend, a crucified victim, then a resurrected victor. But most of all, he will embody for the world God’s eternal love.”

With that, the meeting concluded. And with this holy miracle of incarnation, almost all the suggestions of the angel cadets had been honored. In the fullness of time, God came to us as Jesus the Christ – as the *Ruach*, the breath of life and as the living Water that washes and renews; as the Bread of Life that feeds us body and soul and as the Light of the World, that no darkness can overcome; as the Word made flesh and as music and tears and joy and laughter, especially the laughter of children the world over. But mostly God came to us as Love. And on earth as in heaven, there was great rejoicing.
AMEN