

Naming the Baby

Isaiah 7:10-16

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 1:18-25

December 22, 2013 Advent 3C

What do we name the baby? Just in case you need help, Babycenter.com lists the top ten names for 2013 as these:

(boys) (girls)

1 Liam Emma

2 Noah Olivia

3 Ethan Sophia

4 Mason Ava

5 Jacob Isabella

6 Jack Mia

7 Lucas Emily

8 Jackson Charlotte

9 Logan Amelia

10 Aiden Abigail

After a long time of creative and cute, maybe cutesy, names, more traditional names seem to be coming back.

We all have stories of how we got our own names, or how we chose names for our children, or how our crazy relatives

chose those strange names for their kids. Our oldest daughter, Jennie, had been a foster child for the first 8 years of her life, and so when we finally got to adopt her, we gave her 3 name choices that she liked, and she chose her own. Our son John was named after 2 favorite college professors. Our youngest, Heather, well, we just liked the name and it hadn't become popular yet.

In Bible times, choosing names was an even more important process than it is now. A name tried to define the very essence of a person, or at least the parents' wishes for that person. Adam meant "earth." "Esau" meant "hairy," and he was indeed that. Jacob meant "heel-grabber" and he was competitive with his older brother to a fault. Later, after wrestling the angel, Jacob got a new name, Israel—"one who contends with God." Moses means in Hebrew, "Draw out." He was drawn out of the waters of the Nile, and destined to draw his people out from slavery to freedom. Often a child's name would relate it to God. The "el" in names like Samuel refers to Elohim, one of the words for God. "Iah," in names like Isaiah and Jeremiah, refer to Yahweh.

Today, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday before Christmas, we heard Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. This account follows 16 verses naming Jesus' family tree, starting with Abraham, going to David, and then on to Joseph. We heard how Mary was carrying a child of the Holy Spirit. We heard that Joseph, being a fair and caring person, decided to break the engagement quietly. Joseph could have publicly denounced her for being unfaithful, and have her exiled or even stoned to death. But Joseph was righteous—not self-righteous and judgmental, but righteous in wanting to do the right thing. Then he had a dream, where an angel, a messenger, came from God and told him, and said:

“Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph, the down-to-earth, hard-working carpenter, was also a dreamer—and thank God, he listened to his dream.

Matthew goes on to tell us that this came about in order to fulfill the scripture from Isaiah 7, that we also heard this morning, that a virgin would give birth to a child, and they would name the child “Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

“Emmanuel” describes Jesus very well, but Joseph, obedient to the angel, named the child “Jesus.” Joseph lived in an area where there were many Greeks and Romans. “Jesus” was the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, the one who led the Israelites into the Holy Land after Moses’ death. And that name in Hebrew means “One who saves,” or “Savior.”

Although we hear the song, “Mary, What’cha Going to name the Baby,” it’s interesting to remember that Joseph named the child. Often the name came through the wife and her family. But Joseph, though not the biological father, in a sense adopted the child, and accepted him into his family by naming him.

Joseph Pagano, an Episcopal priest, says this about his namesake, Joseph the carpenter: “The wonder of this story is that through the faithfulness of an ordinary man, God was doing something extraordinary. The amazing news that God is sending his son to be born of a virgin, to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world, is working itself out in the faith and obedience of a humble man like Joseph. The angel proclaims the miraculous news that God is coming among us as a little baby, and unlike Mary, who responds with joyful exuberance

by saying, "my soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," Joseph speaks no great words. Joseph was not a big talker. He was a carpenter, a practical man.

Joseph was also a faithful man, but he didn't need to make a big show of it. He listened for God's word, and he tried to follow it. And when God spoke to Joseph in a dream, Joseph got up and did all that the Lord commanded. He married Mary. He got them to Bethlehem. He named the child Jesus. And through his no-nonsense, faithful response, God was working out his plan for the salvation of the whole world. And this is amazing!"ⁱ (unquote)

Years ago I read a book about being a Christian man, and the writer started out by recalling when he was a child, and the Sunday school superintendent recruited him to be Joseph in the Christmas pageant. He was thrilled. What a role! He would be there to protect and support Mary. He would welcome visitors and show them hospitality as he showed them their newborn son. He would rock the child with a father's tender love. But the Sunday school teacher said, "Just stand there." Just stand there. What a let-down.

Ann Weems, in her book *Kneeling at Bethlehem*, also thought about Joseph's role in her poem "Getting to the Front of the Stable."ⁱⁱ

Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?

Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand,

and told him to stand in the back of the crèche,

background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?

God-chosen, this man Joseph was faithful

in spite of gossip in Nazareth,

in spite of the danger from Herod.

This man, Joseph, listened to angels
and it was he who named the Child Emmanuel.

Is this a man to be stuck for centuries
in the back of the stable?

Actually, Joseph probably stood in the doorway
guarding the mother and child
or greeting shepherds and kings.

When he wasn't in the doorway,
he was probably urging Mary to get some rest,
gently covering her with his cloak,
assuring her that he would watch the child.

Actually, he probably picked the Child up in his arms
and walked him in the night,
patting him lovingly until he closed his eyes.

This Christmas, let us give thanks to God
for this man of incredible faith
into whose care God placed the Christ child.

As a gesture of gratitude,
let's put Joseph in the front of the stable
where he can guard and greet
and cast an occasional glance
at this Child who brought us life.

Joseph named Jesus. Jesus went on to be called many things. A blind man, crying out to be healed, called him "Son of David." Some Pharisees called him "Son of a Devil." Nicodemus, a sympathetic and open Pharisee, called him Rabbi, a title that meant Teacher. Many called him Lord, which meant Master. 30 times in Matthew and 25 times in Luke, Jesus calls himself "Son of Man," or "The Human One," a term that reminds us that he was a flesh-and-blood person, but also that he was the most human-in-the-good sense that anybody could be. Peter called him "Son of God."

As we prepare for Christmas, as we look at Nativity scenes and read the Christmas story again, I invite you to answer the question, Who is Jesus to you? King? Lord? Redeemer? Healer? Teacher? Shepherd? Savior? Friend? Joseph named the baby Jesus. But what do you name Jesus in your faith, in your life, in your heart?

By Michael E. Dixon

ⁱ Joseph Pagano, "The Faith of Joseph," Episcopal Digital Network, 2013

ⁱⁱ Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Westminster, 1987, p. 50.