

Joseph Named Him Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

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Names matter. When a child is named, it may be that a family tradition is being honored. Sometimes the name just has a nice ring to it. Sometimes a name is chosen to honor a friend or a Biblical character. Sometimes a name hints at a particular value or an imagined vocation. Everyone's name matters.

We named our oldest boy Tim because he looked like a Tim. Our second is Samuel because our research revealed the first Allen to come over from England in 1628 was Samuel Allen. Russ is named after the postmaster in our little town in South Dakota. The postmaster had the best scale in town and all the moms used it to weigh their babies. Russell Birkeland was his name. Clarinda comes from a childhood storybook that Andrea had adored as a young girl. Ask her about that book sometime! It should be in the church library! Names matter.

When it came to naming the child born in Bethlehem of Judea, Mary and Joseph pondered this task prayerfully. They understood the naming of their child as a sacred responsibility. As they prayed, an angel revealed the name. It was not to be Joe Jr. but was to be Jesus. The angel explained the name as meaning, 'he will save his people from their sins.' Thus the name 'Jesus' means 'savior.' His name matters.

I'd like to say a few things this morning about this name and its meaning. "He will save his people from their sins." To be saved from our sins means many things to many people. I like to tell you what it means to me.

For me, it means that Jesus will make it his mission in life to see that God's children do not allow their sins to identify them, that we are identified instead by the spiritual gifts God bestows upon us. We are not to identify ourselves or others by the sins we commit. I rejoice in this truth. Sooner or later, we all do things we're ashamed of, things that leave us feeling embarrassed. To be saved from our sins is to be assured that these regrettable decisions do not forever identify us.

It is tragic when this happens, when someone's poor decision forever identifies him or her. A person's soul is crushed in this way. We often speak of Jesus as the one who comes to set us free. One of the ways he sets us free is by insisting that we be known to each other by our own spiritual gifts rather than by our mess ups. Reading through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; we see in story after story Jesus intervening in situations where the community has labeled a man or a woman according to their sins, and he puts an end to it. He insists we be identified as God's best handiwork.

At Christmas time, I rejoice in this truth, that Jesus comes to free God's people in this way. Otherwise, I would still be known as the boy who burned his parent's house down, or as the boy who skidded his mother's Chevy Nova on an icy winter day into the steel guardrails leaving multiple dents on the passenger side, or the boy who lobbed rotten apples at passing motorists, or the boy who flunked English in tenth grade.

Because I've come to know Jesus as the One who came into the world to save me from my sins, I am known instead for my spiritual gifts: having a listening ear, a compassionate heart, a fascination for music, and a passion for storytelling. My mess ups are always with me, a part of my personal history; but they do not identify me. Jesus insists on that! And that is a fabulous Christmas present to unwrap and embrace every December 25th!

I think my all-time favorite Christmas movie is “Home Alone.” I’ve watched it probably 50 times. Though the focus is on the little boy whose family has left him home accidentally as they go off to Europe on a Christmas vacation, the character I love the most is the mysterious man who lives next door. He has a reputation in the neighborhood as a scary guy, a recluse, one not to be trusted. Half way through the movie, the little boy and the old man meet in a pew at the local church. In this scene everything changes. The little boy discovers the old man is hurting and vulnerable. He discovers the old man is kind and generous and loving. As the boy leaves the church, he has a look of transformation on his face. He no longer views his neighbor as someone to fear, but as someone to cherish. He no longer identifies him as an old guy with a shadowy past, but as a human being with a tender heart.

According to Matthew’s Gospel, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

May the words of the Gospel allow us all to live our lives in the greatest of hope. Amen.