

“You Are to Name Him Jesus”

Matthew 1:18-25
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Names matter. Nicknames matter. Our names often reveal something of our family's history, something of our parent's hopes for us. My brother, Bob, was born on the first day of Spring, so our grandmother called him Robin. He didn't like that too much, but it sure helped us remember he was born on March 21st! My sister's middle name is Jane, named after my mother's sister. My brother David's middle name is Haskell, after our grandfather Allen's middle name. My brother Billy's middle name is Cully, after our great uncle who was a theologian of some note. You get the idea. Names have meaning. Names matter.

So, when the angel Gabriel instructed Mary and Joseph to name their child Jesus, it was with enormous intentionality. The name Jesus carries lots of meaning. In Hebrew, the name Jesus is known as Joshua. Joshua and Jesus carry the same meaning: 'Savior.'

The name Jesus implies the child is to save people FROM something negative and FOR something positive. The work of saving, in the Biblical sense, carries both meanings. By naming their child Jesus, Mary and Joseph place an enormous mission upon his shoulders.

The work of the Savior is to release people FROM whatever oppresses them, FROM whatever holds them back from realizing the fullness of their humanity, FROM whatever fear may be paralyzing them. The Savior brings to the world an energy for this liberating work, an energy that is shared by all who choose to believe.

This, of course, is one way of naming the mission of a church: to join hands with the Savior in doing the work of setting people free.

It's exciting to me that there are lawyers who band together to research cases of men and women who are serving time in prison, but who are innocent. The number of individuals who have been released from behind bars due to the efforts of these justice-minded attorneys is astounding! In a literal sense, this is the work of saving, of rescuing people from that which constrains them from the abundance God intends.

It's exciting to me that the Christian Activities Council instigated Freedom Schools last summer in Hartford's inner city. Freedom Schools have a long history in our country. They are designed to empower children from poor families to break the chains of poverty by ensuring a quality education. Poverty is a chain around a person's neck. Education is the tool for breaking that chain. Thus, the Christian Activities Council, one of our South Church mission partners, is doing saving work, harvesting the energy of the Savior and using it to set at liberty those who are held back by a lack of education. The joy of Christmas is, in part, the joy of being on the receiving end of a Savior's liberating energy.

The name Jesus also implies the child comes to save people FOR something, for something positive, for some mission God has in mind. Mary and Joseph couldn't have known, couldn't have defined what that mission would be; they just understood that their son came into the world to empower believers to use their lives as instruments of joy. Where there is sadness, bring a little joy.

In our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, we proclaim that God seeks to save all people from aimlessness. That is, God comes into the world as a Savior to place a divine purpose into every human heart.

The Savior saves us by granting us life with a purpose! The Prayer of St. Francis captures that sense of purpose so beautifully: “Where there is sadness, let ME bring joy.”

At one time or another, everyone finds themselves wondering ‘what’s my purpose?’ ‘What’s God want from me?’ It’s a question that comes up in Confirmation. It comes up in the proverbial mid-life crisis. It comes up when we lose a job or when we retire or when we have a terminal illness. No one wants to be aimless, a rolling stone, a complete unknown. The second half of the Savior’s work is to lead the right people into our lives, at the right times, to help us discern what God’s purpose is for us.

I thank God all the time for leading the Rev. Chandler W. Gilbert into my life. He doesn’t like to take credit for this, but I tell you, he is the one who discerned that God might just be calling me into the Christian ministry, into the ministry of the local church. He listened to my heart. He heard and understood my passion. He asked the right questions. He encouraged me in all the right ways. Rev. Gilbert is not the Savior. But I believe the Savior’s energy poured through him and found its way to me, such that I do have a clear sense of purpose: to preach the Good News, to teach love, to welcome the stranger, to comfort the mourners, to glean cabbage, and to bring a little joy into somebody’s life.

Mary and Joseph were told by the angel Gabriel to name their child Jesus. He is the Savior. He invites all who believe to walk hand in hand with him to liberate the oppressed and to help one another find the purpose or the purposes God has had in mind for us since our birth. Names matter. Your name matters. My name matters. Jesus’ name matters. Unto us a child is born. Unto us a Savior is given. You are to name him Jesus! I do remain in the greatest of hope! Amen!

