

Sermon 12.18.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year A

Isaiah 7:13-16 | Psalm 80 | **Matthew 1:18-25**

There are a lot of names in today's Gospel reading, and this passage got me thinking about how powerful *names* can be. Maybe you know what your name means, but if not, look it up. It's fun to think about how your name has helped to shape and determine who you are.

Many ancient cultures believed that a person's name was more than just a name, it was a reflection of their character and their very life. In the Old Testament, parents didn't name their children based off of what sounded cute or what was popular at the time, they chose names that carried meaning and purpose. When Hagar had to flee to the desert, pregnant and afraid, she cried out to God for help. God promised to provide for her son, and when he was born she named him "Ishmael," which in Hebrew means "*God has heard.*" When Rebecca gave birth to twins, the younger one was given the name Jacob, which means "*he supplants.*" Jacob ended up cheating his older brother out of his inheritance and father's blessing, and spent much of his life deceiving others and being deceived, until God gave him a new name and identity. And when a boy was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, they named him John, which means "*God is gracious,*" and he grew up to become John the Baptist, whose purpose in life was to tell people about God's gracious love coming to earth.

In the Bible, names are significant. They reveal who people are. They shape people's destiny. They help determine a person's purpose. Names have power. Just ask Lord Voldemort.

On this last Sunday before Christmas, we hear a familiar story about Jesus' birth. Not Luke's version, with its manger and shepherds – instead we hear it from the perspective of

Joseph. It's a story most of us have heard before, and so it's easy to not really notice what kind of story this is. This is a story full of confusion and pain, joy and trust. And perhaps the best way to understand this story is through the names of the people in it.

You see, in Hebrew, the name Joseph means, "*may God give increase,*" and I think this tells us something about Joseph and who he is. He *wants* to be married. He wants a family. He's engaged to a woman named Mary, and being engaged in his culture meant something different than it does today. Being engaged was a binding, public, legal contract. It's not like today, where people can end an engagement or change their minds. According to their culture, Mary and Joseph were already married – they just hadn't finalized it or thrown the party yet.

And while they were engaged, both Mary and Joseph find out that Mary is pregnant. Imagine how Joseph felt. For Joseph, it feels like he's been stabbed in the back, like he's been robbed of his dream and hope. As far as Joseph knows, there's only one way for Mary to be pregnant, and that involves unfaithfulness and betrayal. The name Mary literally means "*bitterness,*" and Joseph probably felt that Mary had lived up to that name.

And imagine how Mary felt! Certainly she had some bitterness of her own! She knows she's been faithful to Joseph, and that her pregnancy came about through no fault – *or even action* – of her own. But who would believe her? When the angel came to tell Mary she was pregnant, she was confused, anxious, and yes, probably full of bitterness. *Why me? This is going to mess things up with Joseph so much! How can I explain this to him when I don't even understand it myself? What is everyone going to think and say about me?*

Mary was right to be scared. According to the law, she could be killed for becoming pregnant. (Deut. 22:23-24) Joseph decided instead to just quietly divorce her so she wouldn't be humiliated or harmed, but then something happened that changed everything.

An angel appeared in a dream. He told Joseph that Mary was pregnant because of the Holy Spirit. That she would have a son named Jesus who would save people from sin. That this was all happening to fulfill an old prophecy spoken hundreds of years ago. That this little baby would be called Emmanuel.

How do you even respond to that? I mean, what do you even say?

If you're like me, you probably have some questions at this point. Like, what in the world does it mean to be pregnant because of the Holy Spirit? How does that happen, and is it contagious? Do we really believe that a virgin became pregnant? How did Joseph know that it was an angel speaking, and not just a weird dream, which we all have? What do we do with this story? How do we believe it? What does it mean for *us, today*?

I don't have answers to all those questions. Sorry to disappoint you. This is a story that we know and love, but it leaves us with a bunch of unanswered and unresolved questions.

And the funny thing is, for as many questions as *we* have, you *know* Mary had more. For as much doubt as we feel about this story, Joseph felt even more. The first Christmas was not perfect and warm and wonderful. They had questions. They were confused. They didn't understand. It felt like their world was being turned upside down.

Life is like that sometimes. Not only do we have unanswered questions, often we have *unanswerable* questions. It's human to want answers to our questions, and God gave us intellect and reason and curiosity so we could seek meaning in this life. But it's just a fact that

some questions are unanswered and some things are unknowable. Life isn't cut and dry, black and white, neat and organized. Often our lives are filled with confusion and questions and things we don't understand. Often our faith is too! And that can be frustrating and infuriating, just as it was for Mary and Joseph.

And in those moments, all we can do is the same thing they did: trust God. Amidst the confusion. Amidst the questions. Amidst the chaos. Trust in God.

I can't answer all of your questions about this story when it comes to virgin births and Holy Spirit-related pregnancies. I can't answer all of the questions you have in your own life when it comes to *why* things happen and *what is* going on. But this morning I *can* point you to a few things in this story that I believe matter, and matter a lot.

As you probably know, Jesus was born into a world controlled by the Roman Empire and Greco-Roman culture. At that time, it was believed that the Greek gods would regularly take on human form, coming down from Mt. Olympus into the world to create havoc and chaos, and leaving humans hurt and broken. Greek mythology is full of stories about the gods doing this. And part of what Matthew is trying to tell us is that Jesus is not like that. He didn't just put on a costume and step down onto the planet. He *was* truly human. He was born of a woman. He came into the world kicking and screaming, experiencing our human frailty and weakness for himself. When you feel weak or frail, when you're going through something difficult, you can take comfort in the fact that Jesus has been there, that he knows what you're going through, that he has literally shared your pain because he has experienced it for himself.

Names are powerful, and his name reveals his purpose, it tells *why* he came. Not to create havoc and chaos, or to wield power over others. He came for our *good*. The name Jesus

literally means, “*God saves,*” and that is what Jesus came to do: to save. He came to save us from our sin. To save us from our ignorance and pride, from our short-sightedness and fear. To save us from *ourselves* so that we could know God’s forgiveness, and grace, and love.

And the name the angel gave him in today’s reading reveals *who* Jesus is. He calls Jesus, “Emmanuel.” In Hebrew, “el” means *God*, “im” means *with*, and “an” means “us.” For four weeks, we’ve been singing ‘O Come, O Come, Emmanuel’ in worship,’ and it’s both a declaration and a cry, because “Emmanuel” literally means “*the-with-us-God.*” Jesus is God with us. In Jesus, God has come to be with us. (Colossians 1:19)

Have you ever stopped to think about what it means that God is *with us*? We say it all the time in church, but what does it mean?

God-with-us doesn’t mean that God always approves of what we’re doing, or that God is always on *our* side. (see Joshua 5:13-15) We have to be careful of thinking that our will is the same thing as God’s will, that God is on our side, because throughout history people have used that thinking to justify some horrible things. When we say Jesus is *God with us*, ‘us’ doesn’t mean just me, or just you. It doesn’t mean just Christians, or Lutherans, and it certainly doesn’t mean Americans. ‘Us’ means all of humanity. The whole world. God came to be with everyone.

But *God-with-us* also doesn’t mean that God is some sort of genie who will grant every wish and do whatever we want. *Even* when what we want is something that is good and pure and right and seems just and holy. *God-with-us* doesn’t guarantee that life will be perfect or free of struggle, or even that all of our questions will be answered.

But *God-with-us* is a promise.

A promise that nothing, *nothing*, can change God's love for you, or separate you from that love. Jesus coming to be *God-with-us* shows that God's love for us is so great that he is willing to become a human, to leave heaven, to experience our messy lives on this messy earth, even to die on a cross, so that we could be saved and know God's love and grace for ourselves. And in a world where we don't get all the answers, where we are often confused, where life is chaotic, the truth of *God-with-us* is something we can trust in and cling to, knowing that so often – just as it was for Mary and Joseph – the times of confusion and chaos in our lives – even when we don't see it and can't understand it – are the times when God is at work doing something new, if we can simply *trust*.

For *God-with-us* is not simply something that happened 2000 years ago when Jesus walked the earth, it is a promise God makes to *you* every day. God promises to be present with you, to dwell in your heart, and to never leave you or forsake you. *God-with-us* means being given the strength you need when you feel weak. *God-with-us means* being given the wisdom you need when you face a hard decision. *God-with-us* is a promise to lead you in the right direction, to convict you when you are wrong, to give you the courage and integrity to act rightly, to bring you peace when the world offers none. *God-with-us* means that you are never alone, never unloved, and never forgotten, no matter what your name is. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Amen.