

"What's in a name?"

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Hymns: Angels from the realms of glory 146, Hope is a star 119, What child is this 161

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*"My daddy left home when I was three
And he didn't leave much to ma and me
Just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze.*

*Now, I don't blame him cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that he ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me 'Sue.'*

*Well, he must o' thought that is quite a joke
And it got a lot of laughs from a' lots of folk,
It seems I had to fight my whole life through.*

*Some gal would giggle and I'd get red
And some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head,
I tell ya, life ain't easy for a boy named 'Sue.'"*

These lyrics may sound familiar.

"A Boy Named Sue" was made popular by Johnny Cash
Way back in 1969.

It's not a Christmas song
But it has a connection to our Gospel lesson.

It speaks to the importance of a name:
How names can shape our destiny
And guide our lives.

'Sue' became a tough man and a good fighter
Because of that name his father gave him;
A name which provoked all kinds of teasing.

Most of us know that names are important.
Expectant parents put serious effort into studying names
Trying them out.

"What do you think about Blair?" she asks her husband.
Oh, never mind, it means peat moss.

"How about Caleb?" he responds.
"It means 'dog'." she says.

A disclaimer: both names are very nice.
People have different reasons for choosing them.

Names need to sound right and feel right.
They need to avoid nasty rhymes
And unpleasant associations.

People chose names to honor friends and family
Or others that they admire.

And for some people a name's meaning is important as well.

Whatever guidelines we chose, names are important to us.
And they have been important to people throughout the ages.
Just think about our Gospel lesson this morning.

Today we are spectators

At what first appears to be a sad situation.

Joseph has found out that his fiancé is pregnant.

Now there's nothing new about

Pregnant women walking down the aisle.

But these circumstances are a little more complicated

You see Joseph and Mary haven't been 'fooling around'.

And he knows he's not the child's father.

We can only imagine the anger, the betrayal,

The hurt that Joseph is feeling

As he thinks about Mary

And the plans they had been making.

Many men in his situation would be thinking about reprisals.

Joseph could have had Mary charged with adultery,

Which was a serious crime in his era.

But Joseph is kind and caring

'righteous' is the way the Gospel writer describes him.

Joseph doesn't want his pound of flesh.

Even while he is hurt, he doesn't want Mary to suffer.

Joseph just wants to move on.

And so Joseph determines

To break off the engagement quietly.

And having made this decision, he goes to bed.

But other plans are afoot.

Grandeur designs than Joseph's hopes
to father his fiancée's firstborn.

Greater purposes than Joseph's wish for a good reputation,
A good name.

Into Joseph's dreams appears an angel.

And the angel delivers this message from the Lord:

"Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married.

Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived.

God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant.

She will bring a son to birth,

and when she does, you, Joseph,

will name him Jesus—'God saves'—

because he will save his people from their sins."ⁱⁱ

'You will name him *Jesus*

because he will save his people from their sins.'

I wonder what Joseph was thinking

As he rolled out of bed the next morning?

"Did that really happen?"

"What did I eat for supper?"

I wonder what Joseph felt

When he ran in to Mary later that day

And saw that bulge in her tummy?

“Could this child really be God’s salvation?”

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Now Joseph had probably had a few ideas
Of names he would have chosen for his children.

If read those verses which precede today’s reading
You’ll realise that Joseph has a pretty famous background
From which to draw names.

But ‘Jesus’?
A new Joshua?
One who will save his people from their sins?

Most of us have great expectations
For our children and our grandchildren.
And so we sometimes give them big names, noble names.
Names that will push them to aspire to greatness.

Names of a beloved aunt.
Names of a talented athlete, gifted actor,
or successful businesswoman.

Names that in their meaning express honor and dignity.

And yet most of us would be careful
about calling any child ‘God’s salvation’.
Most of us wouldn’t dare to say of a daughter
That she will save her people from their sins.

For while we hope that our children
Will grow up to do a little good
Even broach a little reconciliation,
Human brokenness is a huge problem.

It's bigger than our trade disputes with China or the US
Bigger than our inter-provincial arguments about oil.

Just think of the sins in our own lives:
There are sins of commission
And there are sins of omission.
Not just what we've done
But all the things we've let fall to the ground.

There are the sins of our youth:
Sins like lust and greed.

And there are the sins that plague us through adulthood:
Sins like pride and bitterness.

What individual could ever tackle all of these problems?
Who could ever pay our debts,
And go the distance where we've missed the mark?

Surely not this illegitimate child of Mary.

Of course we are told
That this isn't any ordinary baby.
This pregnancy is Spirit-conceived.

God is specially involved
in the life of this mother and child.

For his part, the Gospel writer sees this foretold
Much earlier in Scripture [the writings of Isaiah]:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
And they shall name him Emmanuel’,
Which means, ‘God is with us.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus—he will save his people from their sins.
Emmanuel—God is with us.

After his dream, Joseph accepts Mary
And welcomes the baby he didn’t father.

The question that this text lays before us,
Is whether **we** will also welcome Jesus.

The question is whether we can rely on the testimony of others;
Whether we can accept the testimony of the Holy Spirit
that God has indeed launched a plan of rescue and deliverance
and that it coming through Mary’s son.

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“a recovering addict [tells] the story
about the day he began his road to [salvation].

He had locked himself in a hotel room
To take care of [his] \$600-a-day habit as usual.

[But this] time he finally realised that whenever he turned to chemicals
To achieve a sense of happiness,
He went off to be alone.

He isolated himself from others.
[He ministered to his own needs.]

[Could it be that ultimately sin is ultimately a decision]
to minister to ourselves...

Some people choose to minister to themselves
through chemical dependency,
Others through acquiring money,
shopping, gambling,
Addiction to work..."^{iv}

There are many different ways of going it alone.
But if sin is deciding meet our own needs
Could our rescue be found in letting others near?

Could our salvation mean welcoming the One
Whose name means 'God saves', 'God is with us'
Even if this salvation comes through an unwed teenage,
Mom in Palestine.

Well may we have faith like Joseph.
And may we see the arrival of God's salvation in our lives too.

*So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh;
come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings;
let loving hearts enthrone him.*

*Raise, raise the song on high;
the virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
the babe, the son of Mary.^v*

Amen.

ⁱ Written by Shel Silverstein and popularized by Johnny Cash.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 1:20-21 *The Message*

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 1:23 NRSV

^{iv} Daniel Harris "Forth Sunday of Advent: Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume I* p97.

^v William Chatterton Dix "What Child is this"