

The Name of Jesus

Luke 1:26-38

The other day, as I was channel flipping on the car radio, I came across a story on NPR about the end of the hurricane season. They were talking about how many hurricanes there had been, and how unusual it was to have to use Greek letters once they ran out of the 21 names for the storms that year. The discussion also talked about why hurricanes were named in the first place. It had started in Australia, where a meteorologist started naming strong storms there until he was fired after he started naming storms after politicians. During World War 2, when American soldiers in the Pacific needed a way to talk about the strong storms there, they picked up that tradition, and named them using female names. Over the decades, male names were added, too. But why do we name hurricanes? Naming something makes it easier for the media to report on storms. Easier to talk about them on social media. Easier to hold our attention when the storm passes and it's time for relief efforts. As the report said, "Naming something-- even if it's this inanimate swirl of wind and warm waters-- just makes it feel real and more memorable."

Names have power. "What's in a name?" That was Juliet's question in Shakespeare's famous play, Romeo and Juliet. "That which we call a rose would by any other name smell as sweet." But, in fact, there's actually quite a lot in a name. Names are important, full of meaning. Sometimes they signify a family's trade, like Smith or Baker. Some names tell you who someone's ancestors were, like Johnson or Anderson.

Names have more power than just telling us about people. Names are also signs of love, of closeness. Studies have shown that patients want their doctors to call them by name, though

only half of doctors do so. As a child, you all probably remember that once your parents called out your full name, you knew you were in big trouble! But the same name said in a different tone of voice, with a hug, meant something more important than you were in trouble. Being called by name means that you are loved.

The name given to Jesus has power, too. While we often focus on the reaction of Mary when we hear this story of the Annunciation, of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her she will be the mother of the Son of God, we often just pass over that little detail. Amid all of the other information Mary receives from the angel is the name she is to give her miraculous child. Jesus.

Now for us that seems very auspicious, but it might not have to Mary. Jesus was a very common name in Israel at that time. One article claims that archeologists have unearthed the tombs of 71 men named Yeshua, or Jesus, from Israel around 2000 years ago. We find at least one other Jesus in the New Testament, Jesus Barabbas, the one who is released by Pilate instead of Jesus of Nazareth. It was a common name, though, because of the hope of the people of that time that God would come to save his people again, as he had throughout history.

It isn't just Mary who receives instructions from an angel on how to name this miraculous child. Joseph is told to name the child Jesus, too, in his own angelic encounter. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

So what does this name Jesus mean? Jesus is the Greek and Latin form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “the Lord saves.” Even before Jesus’ conception God had a plan for Jesus to be our Savior and rescue us from sin. Jesus’ name says who he is and what he came to do: Jesus saves.

Because Jesus is God, he is able to forgive our sins. And because Jesus is fully human, he was able to bear the punishment for our sins in his body. That is why he came, to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21), to save us from our sins.

Jesus is the most wonderful name in the whole world. We read in the book of Hebrews that Jesus is “the name above all names” (Hebrews 1:4). Peter appearing before the Sanhedrin preached that Jesus is the only “name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Yet what is so special his name? Why should we care what we call him? Would it make any difference if his name were Steve or Frank? What’s so special about the name Jesus?

Quite a lot, actually! In the ancient world, a name was more than just something you called somebody. Names meant something. Names captured the essence of a person: their character, their reputation, the circumstances of their birth, and their parents’ hopes and dreams for their future. Names mattered because a man and his name were one and the same. The first man is called Adam because he is made out of the earth, the adamah. The baby who is drawn out of the Nile River is named Moses because of those circumstances. Daniel is renamed Beltshazzar when he is in Babylon, because he needs a name that praises the Babylonian gods, not the God of the Israelites.

So it is with Jesus. Jesus is our Lord and Savior, the one who saves. Yet a Savior must save you from something or someone. From what does Jesus save us? According to Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, Jesus saves us from “sin, death, and the power of the devil” That’s why the angel in Joseph’s dream told him to name Mary’s son Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Joseph and Mary followed the instructions of the angel and named their child Jesus, because he would save people from their sins. Jesus wasn’t just the name he received from his earthly parents. It was the name he received from His heavenly Father.

We, too, have received a name from our heavenly Father. In Baptism, God called you by name, added you into his family. The name of Jesus was placed on you. And because you have been called by name, because you have been chosen by God to be his beloved child, God promises that He will never let you go. God promises that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

Jesus came to save you from your sins. Someday he will come again to judge the living and the dead. But right now, as we look into the manger with Mary and Joseph, we see that Jesus comes with salvation. The Lord saves. What a wonderful promise. What a wonderful name.

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