

SERMON TITLE	What's in a name?
TIME/PROPER	Advent 4, Year A
PREACHER	The Rev. Harry Klassen
DATE	December 19, 2004
SCRIPTURES	Isa. 7:10-16 & Mt. 1:18-25

Isa. 7:10 *Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.*

Mt. 1:18 *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Naming has lost significance in this culture. However, certain names rise to ascendancy for a time period because of some current phenomenon. However in ancient Israel, names had not only importance, but often conveyed a message. Such is the case with Isaiah's sons. The prophet Isaiah has made an approach to the King of Judah and asked him to seek a sign from God. Note how the king refused respond in very pious language – 'I will not put the Lord to the test.' In reality he was suggesting that either he was not interested, or that he was afraid what the sign might indicate. At this time the Assyrians were in the ascendancy, and smaller nation states are forming alliances to fight against Assyria. These include Israel and Syria which are threatened by

Ahaz's refusal to join the coalition. In reality the sign announced to Ahaz is a hopeful one: Soon a child will be born and before he reaches the age when he can distinguish between good and evil Syria and Israel would no longer be a threat.

The name of the child is Emmanuel – “God with us.” This passage became a flashpoint of controversy when the RSV came out in 1952. Instead of ‘virgin’ they translated the word ‘young woman’ which in reality is closer to the Hebrew text whereas the King James had used the Septuagint version. This created such a furor that fundamentalists in the Southern USA actually burned copies of the RSV translation. In the Hebrew her marital status is not indicated by the word. Matthew's use of the verse simply is evidence that there is a unity of the ways of God with his people. His use of this passage is not inappropriate although it cannot prove a virgin birth as such.

Therefore the message reminds us that ordinary events such as pregnancy and birth, “even when understood as not miraculous - [are] signs of God's concern for God's people. That good news comes into a world with such concrete problems as international politics and threats of war.”

p. 24 Preaching thru the Christian Year A. Thus in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, the war in Iraq, tightened border security; the potential for a recession and everything else being experienced as a result, is precisely the backdrop for good news as we end the year 2004.

Notice how simply the story unfolds in Matthew's Gospel. What are we to make of the details of this story told from the Joseph perspective. Craddock: “A visiting angel dazzles us, an obedient Mary moves us, and a virgin birth arouses our minds.” All conditions of normal action and human achievement are absent. We simply have the announcement of gift. The amazing story stands on its own and invites us to ponder and consider our response. For nothing will be impossible with God!

Several observations are worth noting. The Matthew passage is certainly very familiar, and does give Joseph a place denied him in Luke's account. While we use the idea of virgin birth, what we are really talking about is virgin conception. The nine month period of gestation and delivery are interpreted as normal. Further, we note that the Holy Spirit is not depicted as providing the male counterpart of the sperm fertilizing the egg. Rather what we have presented is the same Spirit who broods over the waters and brings light and life into being in the Genesis creation story. This spirit breathes life into the earth creature rendering the creature ‘a living being,’ and is the same spirit who overshadows Mary. The Spirit ‘creates’ from nothing new life in her womb. However to assert this is to underscore a problem. “In the life of the Church, Christmas has long surpassed Easter as the favourite holiday, if not in the minds of the theologians, at least in the minds of the parishioners. Christmas is the season of romance, candlelight, and midnight services. In the celebration of Christmas the promise of peace, the yearning for togetherness, the exchange of gifts, and the family feast all find expression....But these same narratives of our Lord's birth are also a favourite target for criticism by the rationalists. So filled are the birth

stories of Jesus with legendary details that their historicity collapses when they are placed under the microscope of modern scholarship.” So claims the radical Bishop Spong. p. 44, Born of a Woman. His observation places the issues starkly before us.

On the one hand we sentimentalise the story of Jesus birth so much, that it has lost its power to convict us. We forget the significance of the name. “You will call his name ‘Jesus’ because he will save his people from their sins.” ‘Do we need saving?’ is the modern person’s query. On the other hand, can we really believe in a virgin conception, a star leading magi, angelic choirs singing to shepherds?

Dr. Spong’s questions are not easily laid to one side if we are to remain intellectually honest. However we need to appreciate Matthew’s purpose for narrating the story as he does. In the two birth accounts, Matthew has Joseph as a main actor whereas Luke gives special prominence to Mary. That this should be so stems from the evangelists concern with their own message and may not reflect a separate Mary or Joseph tradition. For Matthew, it is essential that he make the necessary link to Joseph to establish Jesus as the son of David.

But Matthew also sets in motion a link with the Moses story especially. The flight into Egypt saves the baby from a wicked king; [Moses in the bull rushes] Jesus will one day deliver his people from sin [Moses delivers them from Pharaoh’s bondage]; and similarly linked to Joshua, with the same etymology as Jesus, will lead them into the promised land, i.e., the kingdom of God. In Matthew, Jesus is depicted as the new lawgiver, the teacher, with five groupings of sayings throughout the Gospel, the most famous being the Sermon on the Mount.

In contrast to King Ahaz, Joseph is told by an angel three times during the course of the infancy narratives to do something and he does it. In other words, Matthew is emphasizing that active response to the news of God’s grace is required. And this response cannot be only in word, but also in deed. “not every one who says to me Lord, Lord shall enter the kingdom, but one who does the will of my Father.”

When Joseph realizes that Mary is pregnant, he has no choice by Jewish law but to give her a bill of divorce. Being an honest and fair man, he decides to quietly divorce her rather than make it public; the angel intervenes and tells him that Mary is not to be judged as an adulterer, but rather has conceived through the Holy Spirit. Therefore he can still marry her which is what he proceeds to do. The activity of this birth, like the activity of God establishing the dynasty of David, lies entirely with God’s initiative, although Joseph has to respond after the fact. Indeed in selecting people for the Christmas pageant in the Prayer for Owen Meany, when the author is suggested for Joseph, he observes: “For what an uninspiring role it is; to be Joseph - that hapless follower, that stand-in, that guy along for the ride.” p. 160. Mary’s role in the conception is also passive, but from that point forward, she bears the child full term.

Naming becomes an issue. Jesus, Yeshua, is a common name amongst Jewish boys of the day. Here it is given specific meaning - save people from their sins. The note of grace and forgiveness

is introduced early. Matthew reinterprets the Isaiah passage and applies it to Jesus. Just as the child's birth will be sign to King Ahaz that something momentous is about to happen in their history, for the people in Jesus's day, a similar sign is given - the implication being that God will be with them, 'Emmanuel.' But there is no evidence to indicate that Jesus was ever referred to by the name Emmanuel. But surely "all that was involved in the name found its fulfilment in him." Morris, Gospel of Matthew p. 31. Indeed, Matthew's gospel ends with the very promise that Jesus will be with us: "And remember, *I am with you always*, to the end of the age." 28:20

This is what Christmas is all about. It is about a God who has entered the world; who has become like us; who tasted human suffering and death; who knew what it was to be hungry and tired; who wept and laughed with friends; partied at a wedding feast, who was betrayed, but who held out great hope to us. In him, the kingdom of God has come and is coming and one day will come in great power. The divine reversal will be complete.

But singing carols is easy. I'll bet Joseph would have much rather the message from God had asked him to prove that he was an all round good bloke by faithfully singing Christmas carols every year. The hard part is integrating the values of those carols into the core of your life. As Hugh Mackay from Australia pointed out in the newspaper the other day, the survey statistics tell us that the vast majority of those singing joyous Christmas carols in this country this week are in favour of closing our borders to desperate people seeking refuge from violence and oppression elsewhere in the world. We can sing about Joseph and his family having to flee to Egypt as refugees, but if he tried to flee to Australia he'd be just another middle-eastern "illegal" and we'd send the navy out to make sure he didn't enter our territorial waters.

When Joseph stood at the crossroads point of his life and God challenged him to do the right thing even against public opinion, conventional morality and good common sense, Joseph proved himself to be a man of integrity. Our nation has stood at the crossroads in recent months and proved itself to be a nation of heartless and godless selfishness. And no amount of carol singing can whitewash that. The wisdom of this season of Advent is that it challenges us to prepare for the celebration of Christmas by remembering that the one whose birth we will celebrate is the same one who will come to judge the substance of our lives and expose what we are really made of. Tomorrow night we are going to sing lots and lots of Christmas carols. Let's sing them with joy and enthusiasm, just like everybody else, but let's also remember Joseph, and remember that when God calls us to commit ourselves to the Christ-child in the real world, saying 'Yes' may not be nearly as easy or popular as singing carols.

This year as you celebrate Christmas, will you be celebrating the reality that God is with us; that you have grown in your understanding of that reality during the past year? One of the credits at the beginning of the book A Prayer for Owen Meany... simply says: "Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig." Leon Bloy. What will this Christmas be for you?