

December 24, 2017 – Christmas Eve 11:00 pm

TEXT: Matthew 1:18–25

TITLE: In the Name of God

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Names are important in telling stories, especially the Christmas story. Sure, getting the details right is also important: There was a young woman who is told by an angel that she will give birth to a child of God; there was her fiancé who was instructed not to divorce her but care for her as his wife. And describing the setting of the Christmas story is very important: how it all starts in the Galilean town of Nazareth, and then due to an oppressive government's decrees moves to little Bethlehem outside the capital of Jerusalem, to an inn with no spare room except the space near where the animals were kept—it's important to know all that. But in the end, names matter the most—Mary, Joseph, and their child called Jesus (God saves) and Emmanuel (God with us). Names matter.

It's both sad and funny that given how much attention is dedicated to Christmas every year, how rarely we hear the names at the heart of the Christmas story. We hear a lot about Santa, Kris Kringle, and Rudolph, but less about Jesus. Humorist Dave Barry commented that to avoid the risk of offending anyone, his kid's school dropped religion altogether from their Christmas concert. Instead they offered a winter program and sang songs like "Frosty the Snowman," "Let It Snow," and "Suzy Snowflake" even though they lived in Florida. He said that if a visitor from another planet saw this program, it would assume we all belong to the First Church of Meteorology.

Names matter. That's why when Matthew sat down to write his gospel, he began with a genealogy, a listing of names going from Abraham through King David and Solomon to finally end up with (in his words) Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. That long list of names is meant to remind us that all that has gone before is still a part of this Christmas story. So for example, when we hear the name Joseph, we are meant to remember old Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, to whom God also spoke through dreams—and who was also righteous and just. And just as all those prior generations prayed to God for salvation, now a story is told about a long-awaited child born in a manger and named Jesus, which literally means "God saves."

But that name only tells part of the story. Was Matthew's story meant to be an example of God breaking in to save the day—of God, similar to the Greek and Roman myths, making a guest appearance among mortals in order to impress us, teach us, or momentarily fix things before disappearing back in the heavens? No. That is why a second name was assigned to this child. In addition to Jesus "God saves" is the name spoken earlier by the old prophet Isaiah—"Emmanuel", "God-with-us." This is not a story about a one-time event. It's a once-for-all-time story with two names that truly matter.

Jesus—"God saves." The first name begs the question, "Saves us from what?" Street corner preachers might insist Jesus saves us from hell and leads us to heaven. Miracle

seeking chaplains may suggest that Jesus saves us from disease and leads us to wholeness. Atheists may argue that they're doing just fine and don't need anyone to save them. Each of those options merits a sermon on its own, but Matthew offers his own answer. The angel told Joseph "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Sins—wrongs done against God, against others, and against the image of God within us. Brokenness, woundedness, violence, prejudice, hatred, and fear: There is no shortage of things named "sinful" and from which we need to be saved. The desire to be saved is as personal as each one of our hearts and as general as the needs of our nation and world. The desire to be saved is there in tearful prayers of contrition whispered alone, in voices raised in the #metoo campaign speaking out against sexual abuse, in letters written to those in power so that the weak and vulnerable around us might not be cast aside in the rush to line the pockets of the wealthy and powerful. That desire is there in efforts to care for the earth, to convert the racist and warmonger, and to comfort the grieving, addicted, and lonely. But how? A one time infusion of God's grace into a world that is perpetually scarred by sins done and goodness left undone doesn't seem like the right answer—or the salvation we long for.

There's a story about a group of friends who always went to the Christmas Eve service together, except for one friend who stayed home and read the paper, largely indifferent to religion. He wasn't bad or antagonistic toward Christianity; he just didn't see the relevance of a story of a baby in a manger. Suddenly he heard a loud rap on the window and saw that a bird had flown hard into the glass. It was shivering and had plastic caught around one wing. But when the man went out to try and help it, the bird hopped and kept fluttering into the snow and thorns of the bushes near the house. Wanting to help yet seeing how the injured bird kept avoiding him, at one point the man yelled out in frustration, "Look, bird, can't you see that I'm trying to help you? If only you wouldn't keep flying away...if only I could become a bird and get you to understand." Just then the church bells rang—midnight on Christmas Eve—that time of a baby born in a manger—and the man heard and for the first time understood for himself.

Names matter: Jesus—"God saves" and Emmanuel—"God-with-us." "God with us" revealed in a helpless child, in a place far from palaces and thrones, born into a family destined soon to become refugees fleeing political violence by escaping across the border into Egypt. "God with us" defined spatially by people existing on the margins, temporally by coming to earth in the dead of night, and structurally by an incarnation of the divine in an infant, the humblest of human forms. "God with us" is both a name and an unconditional promise. It is spoken without an expiration date or qualifying clauses. "God with us now and forever"—"God with us whoever we are, wherever we are, how ever we find ourselves this very night.

In the famous verse from the first chapter of John's gospel, it says "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Eugene Peterson's The Message bible translates that line by saying, "And the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

Imagine that to be true for your life—and then remember this: The Christmas Savior called “Emmanuel,” God-with-us, is the same risen Lord who in Matthew 28 sends us out into the world to teach, baptize, comfort and love as he has loved us—saying to us directly “I am with you always to the end of the age.” We are not alone. We are called beloved by the one who loves us. We are called disciples by the one who is the way, truth and life. We are called home by the one who welcomes every prodigal. We are called church by the One who dwells in our neighborhood. Jesus, Emmanuel, is with us this day and always. Remember those names, because they matter.