

Sermon for Sunday, December 16, 1979, by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"NAME BRAND CHRISTIANS"

St. Matthew 1:18-25

Philippians 2:5-11

Text: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Philippians 2:9-11

Everyone likes to be called by his name. It means people know who a person is, and we all like to be known. In ancient history, a person's name not only identified him, his name also told us something about him for names had definite meanings. In the Old Testament we have such names as David, which means "beloved", or Hannah, meaning, "God has favored me"; or James, meaning "May God protect." Among the Greeks names often bore more abstract qualities where the name Alexander meant, "helper of mankind," and George meant, "farmer," and Philip meant "lover of horses." Latin names included things like, "Clarence", meaning "famous", or Emily meaning, "industrious," or Patricia, meaning "noble."

Later on, particularly in the middle ages, people were given last names and they usually had to do with where a person lived or what his occupation was, or what an ancestor's name was. For example, if a person lived near a mountain or a hill, he became Mr. Dumont in France, Mr. Zola in Italy, and, of course, Mr. Hill in English. In England a person might be called Wood or Lake or Brook or Ford because of the place where he lived. Sometimes a person got his name by where he worked or what he did. For example, in those days people often could not read and an inn or a pub might have some identifying picture on it such as a boar or a swan. And the person who worked there might become known as Mr. Boar or Mr. Swan. Others would be identified by their occupation such as Mr. Miller or Mr. Carpenter or Mr. Taylor or Mr. Baker.

Now, in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, name was identical with character. If you knew a man's name, you knew the most important thing about him for his name was a key to who and what he was. Thus, when God called Abram out to begin his people, his name was changed to Abraham, which means, "Father of many nations." His new name was a clue to who and what Abraham was as God's chosen man. Again, when Jacob was born, he was the second of twins and was born holding on to his brother's heel. So, Jacob means, "heel-snatcher", and that was the kind of person he was. Jacob--or heel-snatcher--was a clue to his personality for he was the kind of person who would trip you up. He stole his brother's birthright and later on he tricked his father-in-law (who was no mean crook himself!) and made off with most of his cattle.

So name was synonymous with character. If you knew a person's name, you knew the most important thing about him. That is why when God called Moses to go to Egypt and bring his people out the single most important question that Moses could ask God was this, "what is your name?" That is, tell me your name--give me the key to who and what you are. Do you remember what God replied? He said, "My name is 'I am'." Tell them 'I am' sent you." When you stop to think about it, that is the most significant clue Moses could have to the character and nature of God.

Now, in light of this, when we come to the beginning of the New Testament and the birth of Jesus, it is very, very important that the angel who visited Mary and the angel who visited Joseph in both instances tells them what the name of the babe is to be. That name is a key to his character, it is the secret to who and what the child is to be. It is no accident, then, that the angel says, "and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." And that is what the name of Jesus means. It means, "to save", it means, "saviour" or one who saves.

So, right in the beginning, the mother and father of Jesus have a clue to the future. Not only is the child to be holy, as the angel said to Mary, but he will be the very Son of God. And this very special child is to have a unique role in the history of the world, for his name will be Jesus, for he will save his people.

At this point let me add a sort of parenthetical thought. In the Old Testament, God had already shown the Jews that sin demanded a life. You remember in the third chapter of Genesis how God gave instructions to Adam and Eve. He said, "Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, do not disobey me, because if you do you shall surely die." The penalty for sin is death. That is why blood sacrifice is a part of the Old Testament. Blood represents life and through the sacrifice of specified animals where the blood of the animals was spilled, the Jews received forgiveness. As an example, look at the yearly Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur as it is called by the Jews. On Yom Kippur, two lambs were brought to the temple to the High Priest. Lots were cast and by this process one of the lambs was selected for sacrifice. His blood was taken into the Holy of Holies in the temple by the High Priest and sprinkled on the shallow dish called the mercy seat which was on top of the ark of the covenant. The other lamb was taken by the High Priest who laid his hands upon the animals and prayed, symbolically transferring the sins of the people to the lamb. Then, the lamb was lead away, symbolizing the taking away of the sins of Israel. When a cliff was reached, a stone was tied to the neck of the lamb and it was thrown to its death over the cliff so that it could never return. Then the word was sent back to the temple that the sacrifice was complete.

So sin demanded death. Sin demanded that a life be offered and that blood be spilled before there could be forgiveness. Well, that is the way with sin. Sin does dreadful things to your life and my life. The things we do that are not in God's will cause terrible pain and suffering. Our sin brings us unhappiness, broken relationships, depression and grief. Is there much in your life this morning that needs forgiving?

It is this context that we need to understand the name, Jesus, How was he to be a saviour? How was he to save you and me? The answer comes from the lips of John the Baptist who saw Jesus one day and cried out, "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Does it all begin to make sense to you? Because of sin, blood must be shed, a life must be given for forgiveness to come. For a time, God gave the Jews the sacrificial lambs to be slain for sin, but from the beginning it was the plan of God to give his own son, the Lamb of God, to die for the sin of the world. Isn't that what Isaiah meant (chapter 53) when he wrote, "surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed his stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Yes, the angel said, "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." In our minds eye we can jump ahead to the time when Jesus would sit down with his disciples for their last supper together. There he would take the goblet of wine in his hands and say to them, "this is my blood, shed for you." We can picture him taking the loaf of bread in his hands and breaking it before them and saying, "this is my body broken for you." And over that scene the angels seem to hover and we hear the voice of one saying, "You shall call his name Jesus, (Saviour) for he will save his people from their sins." And from that upper room, Jesus--the lamb of God--went out to shed his blood upon the altar of the cross--for you, for me.

There is so much symbolism in the Christmas story--his name is to be called Jesus, one who saves; he is the lamb of God, to be sacrificed for our sins. Did you know that even the shepherds were not just ordinary shepherds? December 25th was established officially as Christmas back in the 4th century, probably to Christianize a Roman celebration called Saturnalia Festival which was celebrated on December 25th. However, there is an ancient tradition that Jesus was born in the wintertime, a tradition that goes back to a third generation Christian named Hippolytus. Sheep in Israel are ordinarily grazed from April to November. The only other sheep that would regularly be grazed at night in the winter time and in the rainy season would be those sheep kept near the temple in Jerusalem--such as a place like Bethlehem--and which were being prepared to go for sacrifices. That would mean that these shepherds were keeping sheep which were sacrificial lambs. And isn't it fascinating that it was these shepherds who kept the lambs for sacrifice who are brought to the manger to see the lamb of God, Jesus--a saviour--who would give his life for the sin of the world.

There are two things we ought to learn from Christmas. First, Christmas tells us of our condition. It tells us that we are sinners who are lost. We have not lived in God's will; we have not obeyed God's laws. And the punishment for sin is death. Second, Christmas tells us that God still loves us. He wants to forgive us and he has sent a lamb to take our place and die our death. That lamb is Jesus, whose very name means "one who saves."

Let me conclude this morning with a question. We know the name of Jesus--it means to save and his name is a clue to his character, to who and what he is. But what is your spiritual name? If God gave you a name that was the key to who and what you are, what would your name be? As a Christian, what name do you bear? Are you a spiritual off-brand? Or are you a name brand Christian.

Earlier in the sermon I mentioned Jacob in the Old Testament. His name meant "heel snatcher" and that was a clue to his character, to who and what he was. He was the kind of person who would trip you up and deceive you. But I didn't tell you everything about Jacob. You see, one day Jacob had an encounter with God. The Bible tells us that Jacob wrestled with an angel of the Lord all night. I don't know exactly what it means to wrestle with an angel all night, but at least it means in part that Jacob met God and he was struggling with who and what he would be in relationship to the Lord. Have you ever struggled like that? Anyway, out of that struggle, Jacob got transformed--he got his life changed and his heart changed. He became a new person. And God gave him a new name--a name that was in keeping with his new life and the new person he had become. Do you know what his new name was? It was "Israel" and it means, "a prince with God".

Do you have a new spiritual name this morning? Have you wrestled with God, found forgiveness, had your life wonderfully changed? Yes, what is your spiritual name this morning? Is it "One who rebels", "One whose heart is hard", or "One who rejects forgiveness"? Or is your name, "He who is blessed" or "He who is a new creature" or "He who is saved"? Yes, what is your name?

So, at Christmas time a child came. He was an unusual child for he was the Son of God. His name was Jesus which means, "One who saves". Because he came, you can have a new name, too. Yes--Jesus--there's something about that name.