

“WHAT’S IN A NAME?”

Scripture Lessons: Luke 1:26-38

This sermon was preached by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, December 20, 2009 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, SC.

“What’s in a name?” That is the question Juliet asked of Romeo in Shakespeare’s tale of his star-crossed lovers. The implication, of course, is that not much is in a name. So what if she were a Capulet and he a Montague? And then she adds those familiar words, “That which we call a rose by any other name, would smell as sweet.”

Well, perhaps . . . there may be times when names or words could be changed with few if any consequences. I guess we could call a pulpit a car and a car a pulpit and if somehow this caught on and became fashionable it would be accepted in time. Actually, it makes little difference the names we attach to inanimate objects.

Furthermore, we know that names and words can change over a period of time. That is why we must continually update the scriptures with new translations because our language and the meaning of words undergo a transition. In the days when the King James Version of the Bible was being translated the little word “let” actually meant “to hinder”. But in contemporary parlance it means to allow, which is just the opposite. The only place where this ancient meaning is retained is in the game of tennis where a ball that is hindered from going over the net is called a “let” ball.

Or consider the word “professional”. This too has undergone quite a transition in recent years. There was a day when a professional was one who “professed” to devote his life to the service of God -- be it in medicine, law, education, or the ministry. Salary was secondary for one did not do his work for the money received, but rather for the service rendered. Today, however, a professional is thought

of in the complete opposite way. A professional is one who earns his living and makes his money doing what other do fun or as a hobby. And so today we have professional athletes who really “profess” nothing significant in their performance for pay.

So what’s in a name? I hate to take exception to Juliet, but sometimes there is a great deal in a name. And I would suggest furthermore that the names of persons and organizations carry a great deal more weight and significance than we might otherwise suppose. Marketing people have long recognized how a company’s name or its product should be distinctive, memorable, and expressive of its character.

In 1960 a New Jersey businessman by the name of Ruben Mattus created a product he wanted to be perceived as high quality and as deserving the premium price he intended to charge for it. Now don’t bother trying to find this name in a Danish dictionary or on a Danish map, despite the fact that the packaging carries a map of Denmark with a star over Copenhagen. You see, Mattus had simply heard that the Danes make good ice cream. Thus was born Haagen-Dazs ice cream which all of us rushed out to buy thinking we were getting some exotic and premium import. No, it came from New Jersey.

In Kingsport, Tennessee where I formerly lived, a businessman by the name of George Eastman wanted a distinctive name for the company he was founding there. Since his favorite letter of the alphabet was “K” he created a word that both began and ended with the letter “K” thus was born Kodak.

So you see, there can be a lot in a name, or very little. And this is especially true for the given names of people. Parents usually attach a lot of significance to the names they give to their children.

They spend countless hours considering all the possibilities. They may want their child to have a name that is very distinctive, a name that connects the child to a family or tradition, a name is euphonic or that calls to mind certain images, strengths, convictions, or feelings that matter to the parents. Nearly every parent can tell you a story as to why they settled on the particular name for their child.

So the names of children often tell you at least what is important in the minds of the parents. Years ago the late Paul Harvey told of the arrest of a woman by the name of Shannon Cooper who was jailed for abandoning and neglecting her three children while she went bar hopping through a certain city. As it turned out, the names of her children were Champaign, Chardonnay and Chablis. I guess we know what mattered to the mother.

Now in the Hebrew tradition, personal names were thought to be extremely important and distinctive and were usually chosen to make a statement. The naming of a child was not simply a quick solution to the demands of the official registry. No, a name was far more than a handle of identification, more than a pleasing sound, and more than a complement to a friend or relative. A name in reality was an effort to appoint a child its place in history, in the destiny of both the family and the nation, or to bestow favor or blessing on the child. The Old Testament prophets sometimes named their children something that sent a message to the people.

The ancient Hebrews chose a name for its meaning from God's point of view, perhaps as an acknowledgement that the new born child was a gift from the Lord, or as an expression of hope with regard to the child's destiny. Names were given to reveal both character and purpose in relation to the divine will for their children. And so it was that a person's name in the Hebrew culture was expressive of the character and the qualities hoped for or expected in that child.

While most of us do not come out of the Hebrew culture, we also entertain high hopes and expectations for our children as well. As Christians we want them to serve God and to contribute to the betterment of society. We want them to be healthy and happy, loving and wise. We want them to be popular and productive and so we choose names on occasion, with all of these wishes and hopes in mind.

But finding just the right name was not a problem for one particular set of parents by the name of Mary and Joseph. When the angel announced to Mary the coming birth of this special child, he also gave to her the name selected by God, the giver of this child. “You will name him Jesus,” Gabriel told Mary in our morning lesson. And in Matthew’s gospel when Joseph is preparing to dismiss Mary quietly to save her from the disgrace of bearing a child out of wedlock, the angel appears to him as well, explaining that this child conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit and then adding, “She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

So take note, this child, this son, would gain his identity not from his earthly father or mother, but from God. This child did not come to fulfill Joseph’s dreams or Mary’s wishes. In truth they must have been confused and troubled by the knowledge that their son would be the savior. They could only imagine the pain and sorrow, the rejection and loneliness he would experience as he engaged in his redemptive work. If it has been left to them, they may not have wanted their son to fulfill this particular mission. They may have hoped for something quite different for their child --- a skilled carpenter, a learned rabbi, a gifted musician. But the choice was not theirs to make. This child had come from God and had come for the expressed purpose of saving a lost people, of redeeming God’s people from their sins. Jesus was not a part of Joseph and Mary’s plans initially. He was not their idea. Now to be sure, they proved to be receptive of God’s plan for their child, but from the very

beginning Jesus was first and foremost a part of God's plan, a plan to redeem a fallen race, and consequently, Jesus would bear the name chosen and given by God – Jesus.

Jesus is the only person in all of human history who was born to save people from their sins. All parents generally expect great things of their children. We stand over their cribs while they sleep at night and hope and pray that they will be strong and healthy and wise. We want them to bring honor to their God and joy to their family and blessing to the larger community. We want them to achieve important things. But no child ever born save Mary's, was born for the lofty purpose of saving people from their sins. Such a calling, such a mission, would be too great, too colossal, and too improbable for human parents to even imagine. And yet, it was for this singular purpose that Jesus was born and so he was given the name Jesus.

The name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua". Literally, the name means "God Saves". In commenting upon this, the late Kenneth Phifer observed, "Was that not a strange selection for this child, Joshua? Was the name intended to give Jesus the identity of that other Joshua, the successor to Moses, the military leader who presided over Israel's conquest of the Promised Land?" (You remember Joshua of Old Testament fame. He led the people in battle at Jericho and elsewhere.) And then Phifer asked, "Was not Joseph's child given this name to disassociate him from the kind of salvation the other Joshua represented? Jesus puts new meaning into the words 'God Saves'. He gives the phrase a sense of compassion, mercy, and caring. How different this Jesus is from the Joshua who asked God to cause the sun to stand still at Gibeon so that more people could be slaughtered in battle."

That's it, isn't it? Jesus gives complete new meaning to the words "God Saves". "You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins." God knew full well what humanity

needed and that is saving from our sinfulness. If humanity's primary problem had been our poverty, God may have sent us an economist. If it were our ignorance, God may have sent us a scholar. If humanity's plight was due to our weakness, God might have sent us a strength coach; our illness, a diagnostic physician, our oppression, a military leader. But God knew that the human condition is warped and distorted preeminently by our sinfulness, our rebellion against and our rejection of the ways of God. So God sent us a savior rightly named Jesus.

Many people today are still confused as to what they need in life for salvation as they understand it. They think: "If only I had a better job . . . If only my children would call more often . . . If only I did not have this chronic health problem . . . If only another political party was in control . . . If only I made more money . . . If only I had married someone else . . . If only I had another child . . ." All of us entertain our private and personal scripts for what we want God to do for us and we think mistakenly this will be our salvation. But the larger truth we refuse to accept is that we are sinners and our salvation, our wholeness, our completion will never come about until we have accepted the Savior and God's solution to the human dilemma – Jesus.

You see, God does not act according to our wishes or desires. Sometimes the purposes of God leave us as confused and as troubled as Mary & Joseph must have been. God may not give us what we want, but God does provide what we ultimately need. He gives us Jesus, the one who comes to save us from our sins, the one named my God.

For some two thousand years people have missed out on receiving the gift of Jesus because they were awaiting a different kind of Messiah and a different kind of salvation. And unless and until we know Jesus as savior we really don't know him by his name. We don't know him for who he is. But if Jesus is our Savior, then surely his is the most wonderful name ever been given to any child.

Bernard of Clairvaux was a reforming monk born in the 11th century. He wrote ecstatically of what the name of Jesus means:

“As honey to the taste, as melody in the ear, as songs of gladness in the heart, so is the name of Jesus ... Naught but the name of Jesus can restrain the impulse of anger, repress the swelling of pride, cure the wound of envy, bridle the onslaught of luxury, extinguish the flame of carnal desire --- can temper avarice, and put to flight impure and ignoble thoughts. For when I name the name of Jesus, I call to mind at once a Man meek and lowly of heart, benign, pure, temperate, merciful; a Man conspicuous of every honorable and saintly quality; and also in the same Person the almighty God --- so that he both restores me to health by his example and renders me strong by his assistance. No less than this is brought to my mind by the name of Jesus whenever I hear it.”

Granted, for some people today the name of Jesus may be regarded as little more than an overworked expletive, a swear word, or simply one name among many from the pages of history. But to those who call him Savior the name of Jesus is the name above every name. Years after our Lord's death and resurrection, the apostle Paul thought back over Jesus' life and ministry and he wrote the following words about that child of Christmas, words that can be affirmed by any of us who call him Savior today:

“Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall 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.” (Phil 2:9-11)

Prayer: By your grace, O Lord, enable us to know and to love Jesus, as Savior and Lord. By his name as Christians we are marked in baptism and included among his disciples. And we ask today that our living might reflect the life of the one whose name we bear, Jesus, the Christ of Christmas, in whose name we pray. Amen.