What’s In a Name?

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 1:18-25

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Mary may be the most celebrated mother in human history. Countless artists have depicted Mary and her exalted baby. Joseph is typically pictured off to one side or absent altogether. Mary plays the lead role in Christmas pageants. Joseph has no speaking part. Mary is central to the story; Joseph is peripheral. Mary is venerated; Joseph is, by and large, ignored.

I intend today to give Joseph his due. Our bias toward Mary and away from Joseph doesn’t do justice to the Biblical story. While it’s true that Luke gives us an account through Mary’s vantage point, Matthew presents Joseph’s side of the story.

Matthew tells us three things about Joseph in his version of our story. First, we are told that Joseph is a direct descendent of David. His lineage commences with Father Abraham and reaches its high watermark in King David. Since Matthew is primarily writing to a Jewish audience, his claim that Joseph is both the son of Abraham and the son of David is no small matter. Matthew summarizes this genealogy in verse 17: “There were 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the Babylonian exile and 14 from the exile to the Christ.”

The second thing Matthew tells us about Joseph is that he’s engaged to Mary (1:18). Their engagement had been announced some months previous at their betrothal ceremony. It’s like an engagement party, only more substantial. Papers are signed. Formal commitments are made. And money, in the form of a dowry, is given to the bride’s family; a sort of down payment, you might say. The only way to break off their engagement is by divorce. At the wedding ceremony a year or so later, Joseph and Mary will take up residence together and consummate their union.

The third thing Matthew tells us about Joseph is that he’s a “righteous man” (1:19). Joseph orders his life according to the dictates of the Law of Moses, most specifically the first five books of the Old Testament. Joseph is someone who wants to do right by both God and Mary.

Matthew doesn’t record the actual words exchanged between Mary and Joseph when she discloses her unplanned pregnancy. If you will indulge me a moment, this is what I imagine them saying to each other:
“Joseph, we need to talk. There’s something I need to tell you.” Whenever I’m addressed this way, I know to drop what I’m doing and pay really close attention.

Mary wastes no time in getting to the point, “I’m pregnant.” There must have been a pause in the conversation; truly a pregnant pause.

“You’re pregnant,” Joseph plays back to Mary slowly. He’s essentially stalling for time to take in the enormity of what he has just heard.

“Who?” he asks instinctively. “God” is Mary’s one word reply. “The angel told me God will make it happen.”

“God,” Joseph mutters as he stares into space. He wants to believe Mary, but he can’t quite get his head around what she has said. Not that I blame him or anything!

Joseph’s day job is that of a carpenter. His stock and trade is making things fit together. Try as he might, he can’t put this one together.

Joseph can’t shake the thought that Mary must be pregnant by another man. As a faithful follower of Biblical law, Joseph knows adultery constitutes a serious violation of mutual trust. It’s a repudiation of their engagement vows. So, divorce would necessarily follow.

According to rabbinic law, Joseph has two options open to him. He can institute public divorce proceedings on grounds of adultery. If his allegations prove true before a Jewish tribunal, he will be exonerated and Mary’s life will be in danger. The Mosaic Law specified adultery to be a capital offense (Deuteronomy 22:13).

The other option is far less public and more humane. Joseph could summon two witnesses and simply announce in Mary’s presence, “We are divorced,” and the deed will be done. Since Joseph is someone who wants to do right by both God and Mary, this is the choice he resolves to put into motion.
Joseph is stopped dead in his tracks when the angel appears to him in a dream, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus” (1:20-21). These words are virtually identical to the words the angel Gabriel announces to Mary: “You will give birth to a son and you will give him the name Jesus” (Luke 1:21).

Joseph and Mary will not be afforded the honor of picking the name for their exalted son. The angel instructs Joseph, “You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins” (1:21).

Names in those days were carefully chosen. Names were passed down through the family and chosen for their meaning. Biblical names conveyed meaning. Today, we pay more attention to how a name sounds rather than its meaning. Names are not chosen for their meaning; they are chosen to connote individuality and unique identity.

Creating novel sounding names and exotic spellings is especially popular among the entertainment crowd. Jay-Z and Beyonce named their daughter Blue Ivy. Singer Christina Aguilera named her daughter Summer Rain and Kim Kardashian named her daughter North West. Comedian Penn Jillette and his wife named their daughter Moxie Crime-Fighter. Actress Shannyn Sossaman named her daughter Audio Science. The boys don’t fare much better. Film Director Robert Rodriguez and his wife named their four boys Racer, Rebel, Rogue and Rocket. Chef Jamie Oliver named his son Buddy Bear and actor Nicolas Cage named his son Kal-El, which is Superman’s birth name.

Jesus was a common first century name. Its Greek form, Iesous, equates to the Old Testament Hebrew name Yehoshua or its shortened version Yeshua. The English form of the Hebrew Yeshua is Joshua meaning “God saves.” “You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew continues, “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet” (1:22). This same phrase is repeated 16 times in
Matthew’s gospel to demonstrate to a Jewish audience all the ways Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy.

The specific passage Matthew quotes originates from Isaiah: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (7:14). The precise translation of the Hebrew word “Immanuel” is Im (with), manu (us), El (God). Since “with-us-God” is an awkward interpretation, Matthew translates this word Immanuel as “God with us.”

Two names are given to this Messiah: God saves and God is with us. A few moments from now, I’ll invite you to respond to God’s invitation to save us and go with us.

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian and philosopher of 150 years ago, wrote a parable entitled “A King and a Maiden.” The king is riding in his carriage one day. Through the window, he sees a beautiful peasant woman. Immediately, he is drawn to her. Now, kings don’t marry peasants; they marry queens. But this king couldn’t get this beautiful woman out of his mind. This king could order this peasant woman to marry him. After all, he’s the king. But even a king wants to marry a woman for love. So, he discards his royal robes and dresses in peasant clothes to win her love.

Most world religions offer a way for people to ascend to God. Do these religious exercises and you’ll become like God. Observe these practices and you’ll secure God’s favor. Kierkegaard writes about his parable, “Since this union could not be brought about by our elevation it must be attempted by a descent.” Since we can’t ascend to God, this God condescends to us. God becomes like us. Jesus is God with us.

These two names for this long-awaited Messiah, Jesus and Immanuel, express the heart of the gospel. God saves us. God goes with us. If God comes to us in Jesus Christ to save and go with us, it only begs the question, what are we doing to be with him?
Every year at this time, we receive invitations to attend office parties, open houses, holiday parties and Christmas concerts. God makes an offer you don’t want to refuse: the invitation to save and go with us.

If you desire to respond to this invitation to follow Jesus, I’ll invite you to stand during our closing prayer. This standing is not for everyone. It’s for those who want to announce to God and to self your intention to follow Jesus. As I pray the prayer on our screen, you can pray silently along with me. Earlier, in worship, we heard a testimony from someone who answered the call to follow Jesus.

If you have answered the call to follow Jesus sometime in your past but you need a restart; if you have lost your way or your enthusiasm for Christ has waned, I’ll invite you to stand also. There’s no pressure to stand. But if you want to announce your desire to follow Jesus today, then, by all means, stand.

I’ll close by asking everyone to stand in solidarity for those who are answering Jesus’ call to follow him.

Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.