

Matthew 1:18-25

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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 fulfill 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.

Names matter. Even before we meet them, we have different expectations of people based on their names. A few years ago, the National Bureau of Economic Research did an experiment to find out how names affect job prospects. The researchers responded to over 1,300 employment ads, sending out fake resumes. To some of those resumes they attached stereotypically white names, such as Emily or Greg; while to others they attached stereotypically African-American names, like Lakisha or Jamal.

They found that “job applicants with white names needed to send about 10 resumes to get one callback; those with African-American names needed to send around 15 resumes to get one callback.” That’s a 50% gap in response.

Some other findings from the study were what you would expect. For example, “Whites with higher quality resumes received 30 percent more callbacks than whites with lower quality resumes.” Of course, right? “But the positive impact of a better resume for those with African-American names was much smaller.” Overall, they found that “... a white name yields as many more callbacks as an additional eight years of experience” for an African-American name.

The study concluded, "Discrimination...appears to bite twice, making it harder not only for African-Americans to *find* a job but also to improve their employability."¹ All because of a name. Or, more accurately, all because of people’s *perception* of a name.

Today’s Gospel passage is a story about naming. It takes place in first century Palestine, occupied by the Romans. The Jewish people whose home it was had very little voice in their own life or future. Poverty and crushing debt were the

¹ Bertrand, Marianne and Mullainathan, Sendhill, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination” (NBER Working Paper No. [9873](#))

norm. Even their own religious leaders were imposing more and more burdens on them—and now, into this scenario, a child was about to be born. His mother was a poor, Jewish girl. The father? Who knows. But we do know who the father wasn't: Joseph, the girl's fiancé.

Joseph was, though, a man of compassion, because even though he thought he'd been wronged, he planned to end the engagement quietly, so as not to shame Mary. But then, in a dream, he learned that the child's conception was of the Holy Spirit, and that God wanted him to claim and raise the child as his own.

And the first act of claiming is naming.

“You will name him Jesus,” the angel in his dream told him, “for he will save his people from their sins.” That's what *Jesus* means: *God saves*. Jesus is the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Joshua. It was Joshua who, once Moses had gotten the people as far as the Jordan, led them across the river and into the Promised Land. So the name evokes a story and a meaning of God intervening to save the people by leading them out of the wilderness and safely home.

But the passage in Matthew doesn't end there. It goes on: 'All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by God through the prophet: "Look, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

So here is another name for the child: *Emmanuel, God is with us*. We first heard this name today in our other reading, from Isaiah, which takes place 700 years before Matthew. The name was spoken to Ahaz, the king of Judah, who was too afraid to stand up to the kingdom of Assyria when it was getting ready to invade. He didn't even bother to ask God for help, because he didn't think God was capable of saving them from a superpower like Assyria. To show him differently, Isaiah told him that a young woman was about to give birth to a child named Emmanuel, God-with-us, and that, even before that child was two, the kingdom of which Ahaz was so afraid would fall.

Which it did. But so, because of his lack of faith, did Ahaz.

So now, centuries after Isaiah, Joseph learns that another child, a new Emmanuel, will be born into yet another period of danger and oppression, another period in

which the people have begun to believe that God has abandoned them. And he is to be named *Jesus: God saves*. And *Emmanuel: God is with us*.

The *with* in the name “God is with us” can mean that God is here among us. It can also mean that God is on our side, *for* us, working on our behalf.

And who is the “us” in “God is with us”? We learn the answer to that in the opening of the Gospel of Matthew, the passage right before today’s reading, which is a list of names—what we often refer to as “the begats.”

Now, reading “begats” can be pretty mind-numbing, but anytime in scripture that we see “begats,” we’re intended to see more than just a list of names. Instead, each name is a shorthand reminder of a story, or of some key characteristic of the person named. Taken altogether, then, the names are a string of clues to what we can expect from the person at the very end of the list, because these are his or her physical and/or spiritual forebears.

From the names on the list in Matthew, we learn that this child, this Jesus-Emmanuel who is about to be born, is rooted deeply in the Jewish royal line of David, but that he also has roots coming from Gentiles--foreigners. Not only that,

but Jesus' forebears include the poor. They include prostitutes. They even include women. That may seem normal, but it isn't. Most begats only mention the fathers, because, you know, they did it all by themselves, magically. But Matthew explicitly names several women. Like Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute who risked her life to save some Jewish spies. And like Ruth—another woman and foreigner, whose steadfast love for her Jewish mother-in-law saved them both from poverty and starvation, and rescued the family line from dying out.

Oddly enough, the list of begats also includes Ahaz. The frightened and faithless king from Isaiah. Even he made it onto Jesus' family tree.

So when the child is named "God is with us," the "us" is a much wider group than anyone might have imagined. Those on the religious inside, those on the religious outside; male and female; rich and poor; powerful and powerless; socially acceptable and socially outcast—the whole, messy gamut of humanity.

Jesus: God saves. Emmanuel: God is with us.

Over the last couple of months, we've been blessed to have a number of baptisms. Just as Joseph claimed Jesus by naming him, baptism is an act of claiming and naming by God.

I don't know if you've noticed this, but when we baptize someone--whether infant or adult—the act of baptism doesn't include the surname. When the water is placed on the person's head, we just speak the first and middle names. “Emmie Louise/ Kathleen Claire/ Merritt Anne, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” There's a reason that we don't use the family name. That's because, when we are baptized, we are being claimed into God's family.

We are all baptized by first name, of course. No one is baptized anonymously. With our first names that our parents gave us, all the history that went into making us is claimed—our fathers, our mothers, our forebears, all the nations from which they came, all the complications of their stories and of ours. All of those stories become part of God's story, as each of us—like Emmie and Kit and Merritt—is claimed into God's family.

Whatever the failings of our forebears or ourselves, they are redeemed in the cleansing waters. Whatever the acts of faithfulness, the moments of grace—in baptism, they are embraced.

You see, in baptism, the first name comes from *our* history, but the last name comes from God. And that name is “child of God.”

In baptism, we all receive that name. Whatever our skin color or ethnicity. Whatever our citizenship. Whatever our gender or gender identity. Whatever our income level. Whatever our social status. Whatever our past. In baptism, we maintain our individual uniqueness, our own first names, but we share the same family name: child of God.

We can share that name because, in this divide-and-conquer world, Jesus saves by doing the opposite. By being God *with us—all* of us.

Knowing how names are used to divide and sort and separate, being told that a name can unite us might sound like a dream. It probably sounded that way to Joseph, as well. But when Joseph woke from his dream, there was a real young woman waiting for him, pregnant with a real baby, who would soon be born into Joseph's own, real hands, ready to be swaddled and claimed and loved...and named.