

October 26 – All Saints Day

The names of Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

What's in a name? Our names have meaning and at times they have a family story or history. I was the unexpected baby of the family. To get my older siblings to embrace more fully the idea of having a younger brother they were allowed to name me. They wanted Billy but mom and dad decided William was more appropriate, for the long haul. I was called Billy until I went to third grade. We moved the summer before and I decided I wanted the new church and school to know me as Bill. For many years there were a few folk from my father's first churches who would still call me Billy. So what is in a name? William, my birth name, means strong-willed warrior. My siblings got the first part right about my personality!

I asked the question because our book for this fall's all-church study begins with us looking at the names of Jesus and asking us to think about what those names meant for him and what they mean for us. The two they share are Jesus and Emmanuel. The first means God saves and the other God with us. I am going to explore just the first. Those of you who attend the studies can look at Emmanuel in more depth.

Jesus is the Greek way of writing Joshua and it means, "God Saves." The connection to Joshua should cause us to think back to the story of the Israelites after they left Egypt. As Moses ages, Joshua is groomed to be his successor. He is the one who ultimately leads the people of Israel from the dessert into the Promised Land.

What I want us to think about for a few moments is the burden of that name. As Jesus was growing up I am sure he was told the story of the events we read today. He was told how Joseph had a dream and in that dream an angel of God spoke to him telling him that he was to have a boy, the boy was special, and that he was to name him Jesus. Once Jesus began to hear that story he would have realized every time he heard his name that he was set apart for a purpose. He knew that his parents thought he was to be the one God had sent to save. We don't know what that would have meant to him as he was growing up but at the very least it would have challenged him to live as

faithfully as he could. I wonder if, when he was visiting with the Temple elders at the age of 12, one of the questions he asked was about what it meant to live like Joshua of old. As he worked beside his father, attended the synagogue, and walked around Nazareth, how would the burden of the story of his name have changed him? I think that this naming story prepared him to receive the Holy Spirit as he was baptized by John and it shaped his thinking and perhaps his struggles as he was in the wilderness. When he finally emerges after forty days, he was ready to call people to new life in God. He, like Joshua of old, moved out of the wilderness to bring a message of salvation.

Think about your name. How did it shape your life? Or, did it make any difference. My grandmother wanted me to be named after a long line of Hiram's in her family and particularly for her first born who died in infancy. Would my life have been different if I was a Hiram? Who knows? Did his name make a difference to Jesus? What we know is that his name was so important that God chose to reveal it to Joseph. The story could have been you are to have a baby boy and he will be the messiah. If that was all then, since he was the first born, tradition would have dictated that he would have been named Joseph after his father. But no, the angel also names the child and says the name is also the child's mission, to save us. Joshua lived into his name and saved the people bringing them out of the dessert and Jesus would have felt that same compulsion to live into his name.

What does this all mean for us? First of all we need to hear that the name means "God Saves" not "God saved." This is not a story of what Jesus once did along the shores of the Sea of Galilee but what Jesus continues to do for us. Jesus' name reminds us that nothing can keep us from God. Jesus wants to be in relationship with us.

So, what are the places of wilderness that Jesus is wanting to save you from today? It might be the wilderness of fear. All of us have had those moments when we are looking at an uncertain future and fear grips our heart. Jesus saves us from that fear by being willing to come along side us and walk with us through those times. I am not saying Jesus fixes all of our problems if we have enough faith, but he does promise to not leave us, so we ultimately have nothing to fear. Another wilderness is that of hate, anger or bitterness towards another. We have all had those moments when the actions

of another have hurt us deeply. Jesus, in his challenge to us to forgive, calls us from that wilderness into life. We are saved from carrying around that bitterness and pain. So Jesus, like Joshua wants to lead us out of the wilderness and into our promised land.

When we embrace this joyous truth we can become participants in the saving acts of God. We can be a message of hope when one is feeling hopeless. We can remind others that we are with them when life is scary. We can share that there are no ultimate endings with God but only new beginnings. We, as Christians, are messengers of hope.

This is a message that we need to hear today. This Sunday is a solemn day in the life of this congregation when we acknowledge those who have died this year. Names are important. We called each one by name as we lit a candle and the bell tolled. Those we knew well, the calling of the name reminded us of them, and perhaps we recalled a pleasant or funny moment. Names evoke emotions. We named them in faith celebrating the new life they have received because we follow another who was named by God to remind us that God saves. Those we named today, some carried with them the name they were given at birth, while others carried a nickname that they or another chose to hang on them, are remembered because they also carried another name, and that is Christian. They lived their lives in faith and hope believing in the one who saves.

17 candles, 17 names, 17 stories, but one hope. Jesus saves us, from our wilderness of loss and despair. Jesus promises us life and we who remain are to live our lives faithfully, with hope and with anticipation for what God has yet to do in our lives, either now or eternally. We all have a name, there might be a story behind our naming, but let us celebrate it for it is a sign of our uniqueness and specialness in God's eyes and in the eyes of those who love us.