**Naming Rights**

December 18, 2016

4th Sunday of Advent

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

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any years ago, I made an Atlantic Crossing by ship and every evening on that voyage, the evening menu was printed for all of us to read. The first night dessert was listed as “Ice Cup Black Forrest.” Well, I had no idea what that was going to be, but it was vanilla ice cream with chocolate sprinkles on top. The next night dessert was “Ice Cup Fiesta.” This was the same vanilla ice cream with multi-colored sugar sprinkles on top. Someone in the galley of this liner had the job of creating names for everything on the menu, including the standard vanilla ice cream.

Atley, Destiny, Acacia, Lively, Makenna, River -- these are baby names that have been pinned recently on defenseless infants. Where did they come from? Who knows?

Expectant parents know the difficulty of coming up with the perfect names for their children. Baby name books and websites give us the meanings of names, their popularity or uniqueness and even the potentially cruel nicknames children with that name may hear on the grade school playground. Parents must also consider how each name sounds with their last name, whether they want to use a family name and whether that trendy name they're thinking about will still be cool when the child enters middle school.

Then there are names that one parent vetoes because, "I knew a guy in college with that name and he was so annoying!"

Many parents want the name to be as special as their child. Celebrities are often good at coming up with unique names for their children. Frank Zappa famously named his daughter Moon Unit and son Dweezil (Dweezil's actual name is Ian Donald Calvin Euclid). Gwyneth Paltrow named her daughter Apple. Beyonce and Jay Z gave their daughter the name Blue Ivy. Alicia Silverstone named her son Bear Blu. Tom Cruise has a daughter named Suri, and actor Jason Lee a son named Pilot Inspektor.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Shouldn't there be a law?

It is difficult to imagine Marion Mitchell Morrison as the quintessential cowboy, but his stage name, John Wayne, is just about perfect. Would Peter Hernandez have been as exciting a Super Bowl halftime show as Bruno Mars was? Would Ilyena Vasilievna Mironov have been the Acadamy Award winning actress Helen Mirren is? Could Reginald Dwight have the popularity of Elton John, or Robert Zimmerman the influence of Bob Dylan?[[2]](#footnote-2)

As grandparents, we have learned to sort of stay away from the naming thing. Our job is to feed the grandchildren sugar and give them back to their parents. We are anticipating a third grandchild in February and Josh and China are considering names. They have floated some possibilities past us, but we assure them that this is their job and from the potential names we’ve seen, there is no revelation of gender of this child. For about 8-9 generations all males have had the name “Gordon” somewhere in the Boak line and yes, that was one of the names, but so was Elaine and I doubt that Gordon Elaine or Elaine Gordon are in the mix.

Names are also important in the Bible and sometimes people had their names changed. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah when God promised they would be progenitors of a nation. Their first son was named Isaac, which the Bible tells us means "he laughs" because the parents laughed when God told them they will finally have a child in their old age.

When Jacob, their grandson, finished a night of wrestling with God, he was given the name Israel, which means, "one who struggles with God."

Jesus did not call one of his disciples by his birth name Simon. Instead, Jesus called him Peter, the Rock, long before Dwayne Johnson ever used the name.

New parents Mary and Joseph did not have to come up with a name for the child Mary was carrying. An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him to name the baby Jesus.

**Mary and Joseph**

In today's passage we encounter four names: Joseph, Mary, Jesus and Immanuel. Each contains a key for helping us to live into our lives as Christians.

The name Joseph comes from the Hebrew root Yosef, which means, "He will add," or "God increases."

In the Old Testament, we meet one named Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, the one who struggled with God. The special treatment Joseph received from his father and the large ego that developed from it, prompted his 11 brothers to sell him into slavery. Through a series of God-ordained circumstances, Joseph was appointed manager of the food supply of Egypt during a devastating famine.

This Joseph showed God's increase in his personal life -- rising from slave to government official -- and in his public life by saving Israel when the famine threatened the nation with starvation.

Mary's fiancé, Joseph is also a wonderful example of God's increase. When it would have been much easier to separate from Mary and the child she was having, Joseph listened to God and stayed with her. He didn't take matters into his own hands, but allowed God to work in his life, and the lives of Mary and their child.

At the prompting of God, Joseph named the baby Jesus, took his family to Egypt when threatened and brought them back when an angel told him it was safe to do so.

Joseph consistently got out of the way to make room for God to do God's work in his life. He allowed God to add to him, rather than trying to force his own will, even when God's plans completely altered the course of his life.

I thought, we need to be more like Joseph, people in whom the presence of God grows large.

Mary's name is a bit more complicated. If we consider the Egyptian roots of her name, it means "beloved" or "cherished." In Hebrew, however, her name has a different meaning. The Hebrew word miryam, from which "Mary" comes, means "rebellion." That may sound cute as the name of an infant, but hardly the name you want for a child in their terrible twos or teens.

In a sense, Mary needed both of those qualities for the work to which she was called. She is the beloved one, cherished of God, who is selected to carry and give birth to the Messiah. When the angel Gabriel first appeared to her to tell her about her role in the Christmas story, he called her "favored one."

On the other hand, that rebellious streak -- the ability to follow her inner voice when others might try to convince her to behave differently -- will come in handy throughout her pregnancy.

Her courage allowed her to travel to Elizabeth and Zechariah's when the angel told her to go. It sustained her through her and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and Jesus' birth in a stable. Most importantly, her rebellious nature gave her the ability to say yes to being used by God in this way when she knew the consequences could be dire.

We need to be more like Mary, rebelliously courageous because we know we are loved by God.

**A name for the baby**

While Mary's pregnancy certainly did not make things easy for her and Joseph, God did take one thing off their plates. They did not have to come up with a name for their child. God gave them the perfect name for him.

You might think God would give this special child a unique name. He could have been named Healer, Teacher, Miracle-Worker, Feeder of Five Thousand, One Who Walks on Water, Forgiver or something like that. Instead, he is given a name that was common among first-century Jews.

The angel told Joseph, "Call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The name Jesus means "he saves" or "he will save us." As we saw with Joseph's name, "he will add," the "he" was usually thought to be God.

First-century Hebrews living under the occupation of Rome, named their children Jesus, "he saves," as a cry to God. It was a way of claiming the promise that God would come and set them free.

In this Jesus, however, the name will take on a new meaning. Jesus will proclaim a new kind of freedom that God is bringing to the whole world. In his death and resurrection, we receive the forgiveness of our sins and are saved through him. This Jesus is different from the others named "he saves." He is the fulfillment of God's promise to save us.

Just to be clear, Jesus' last name was not and is not "Christ." Christ is a title, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah. He was probably more commonly known as Jesus of Nazareth, as the Roman soldiers put on his cross. Or possibly as Jesus bar Joseph, that is, Jesus son of Joseph. Or, maybe he was known as Jesus the tekton, Jesus the handyman or carpenter, as it is sometimes translated.

But, as Peter would later understand in Caesarea Philippi, and as we know today, he is Jesus the Christ. He came to save us from our sins and set us free through our faith and trust in him.

Matthew also gives us another name for Jesus, one we sing throughout the Christmas season. He tells us that Jesus' birth fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us')."

Perhaps Immanuel could have been his middle name -- something like Jesus Immanuel bar Joseph -- though middle names were very uncommon in the first century.

This title, if not a name, is an important. God was with us in the person of Jesus 2,000 years ago, and God is with us in our lives today. Amid our joys and sorrows, we need to remember Immanuel, God is with us.

So, the one who gives Jesus his name as far as most anyone knew, was Joseph. He’s an average guy, but he’s a good guy, and you’ve got to wonder why he’s typically ignored in the retelling of the Christmas story. Even the donkey Mary rides on during their journey to Bethlehem gets more press than Joe. Of course, he didn’t help his cause by failing to get advance reservations in Bethlehem, and could do no better for a night’s lodging for himself and his pregnant wife than a stable out back.
In much Christian art, Joseph, when he appears at all, is often depicted as a very old man -- apparently too old to be tempted by the lovely young Mary. Sometimes it appears that the artist is trying to suggest that Joseph couldn’t really be the father of Jesus, anyway, an argument that fails when we learn that Mary and Joseph had other children.

But after the Counter Reformation there arose a cult of St. Joseph that resulted in artistic representations of Joseph as a much younger man, as a true member of the “family.” Even so, pictures of Joseph holding the Christ child are still quite rare. The only non-baroque representation is Michelangelo’s “Doni Tondo.” A much later painting by Carl Muller, depicts a toddler-sized Jesus being cuddled by Joseph. But in the vast canvas of religious art, portrayals of Joseph and Jesus are tragically scarce. It is wonderful that all the windows in the chapel at Nazareth contain women except the one at the end of the nave which contains Joseph.

So, of course, Mary is the star. In some Christian tradition, which has revered Mary as a saint, she’s the *theotokos*, the mother of God. In the Motherhood Hall of Fame, you can’t do better than that, while with Joseph—well, it’s like, this is Mary my wife who just gave birth to this baby. He’s God.”

“No, he’s not mine.”

And what was that baby shower like?!

Mary gets the attention. No woman in the history of publishing has been on the cover of magazines more than Mary, whether it’s *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*. Even *Christianity Today*, has devoted covers and feature stories to Mary.

The birth of Jesus was a scandalous event on many levels. A lesser man might have gone on Jerry Springer to expose this woman for the two-timing trash she was, or at the very least, destroyed her reputation in the community, perhaps even exposing her to severe punishment.

But Joseph was “a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace” (v. 19).

This could not have been easy for Joseph. Pregnancy is not easy to explain away. It was impossible for Mary to explain this development and only divine intervention in the form of a nocturnal angelic visitation caused Joseph to reconsider.

But the text reveals this average Joe to be righteous, considerate, and obedient, even at the moment of the greatest disappointment and heartache of his life. God was with him long before he met Mary, before Jesus was born, before any angelic visitation. He had learned how to be righteous, how to be considerate, how to be obedient and faithful.
No wonder, then, that Mary picked out her man, Joseph, the carpenter, son of Jacob. No wonder that God singled out Joseph for this extraordinary experience. Joseph was an extraordinary man. He was beyond average.

In short, this was just the man God knew would be able to play the role in this most compelling reality experience in his lifetime. It was because of Joseph’s character that he was handed the naming rights for Jesus.

This Matthew text for today will be evaluated traditionally in most churches as a fulfillment of scripture. Matthew does quote the Old Testament Isaiah lesson which we read earlier and the New Testament gives a new interpretation to a prophecy designed to counsel Ahaz regarding his intended military alliance to defend the nation against Assyria. Matthew lifted it and gave it new life, "*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel*." Some pulpits will study this contrast. Others will focus their thinking around the meaning of "virgin." Some may choose to consider the meaning of the name - Jesus, savior, because he will save people from their sins.

But, I submit to you that a hidden hero is Joseph.

Susan writes in a way that we might better understand when she says, “We were the only family with children in the restaurant. I sat my infant son Erik in a high chair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking.

Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee and said, "Hi there." He pounded his fat baby hands on the highchair tray. His eyes were wide with excitement and his mouth was bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled with merriment. I looked around and saw the source of his merriment. It was a man with a tattered rag of a coat: dirty, greasy and worn. His pants were baggy with a zipper at half-mast and his toes poked out of would-be shoes. His shirt was dirty and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. His whiskers were too short to be called a beard and his nose was so varicose it looked like a road map. He was no average Joe but someone a bit lower in my mind.

We were too far from him to smell, but I was sure he smelled. His hands waved and flapped on loose wrists. "Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster," the man said to Erik. My husband and I exchanged looks, "What do we do?" Erik continued to laugh and answer, "Hi, hi there."

Everyone in the restaurant noticed and looked at us and then at the man. The old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby. Our meal came and the man began shouting from across the room, "Do ya know patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo." Nobody thought the old man was cute. He was obviously drunk. My husband and I were embarrassed.

We ate in silence; all except for Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring skid-row bum, who in turn, reciprocated with his cute comments. We finally got through the meal and headed for the door. My husband went to pay the check and told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between me and the door. "Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik," I prayed. As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back trying to shield Erik, but Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position.

Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from my arms to the man's. Suddenly a very old smelly man and a very young baby met in a beautiful relationship. Erik, in an act of total trust, love, and submission laid his tiny head upon the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor--gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back. No two beings have ever loved so deeply for so short a time. I stood awestruck.

The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, and then his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm commanding voice, "You take care of this baby."

Somehow, I managed, "I will," from a throat that contained a stone. He pried Erik from his chest--unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain. I received my baby, and the man said, "God bless you, ma'am, you've given me my Christmas gift." I said nothing more than some muttered thanks. With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car.

My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly, and why I was saying, "My God, my God, forgive me." I had just witnessed complete and unconditional love shown through the innocence of a tiny child who saw no sin, who made no judgment; a child who saw a soul, and a mother who saw a suit of clothes. I was a Christian who was blind, holding a child who was not. I felt it was God asking-- "Are you willing to share your son for a moment?"--when He shared His for all eternity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The ragged old man, who loved more deeply than the average Joe had unwittingly demonstrated that Christmas is about Immanuel, God with us and that "To enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we must become as little children."

**Names matter**

When naming a baby, parents may stress a little too much, trying to find the perfect name, a unique name or even a stage name.

However, when we come to Christ and give our lives to him, we receive a new name -- Christian. There's much we can learn from the names Joseph, Mary, Jesus and Immanuel as we seek to live into that title.

+ We need to be a little more like Joseph, allowing God to add to our lives by surrendering our will to his.

+ We need to be a little more like Mary -- perceived as stubborn and rebellious because we know we are a beloved child of God. We need to follow that inner voice of God, calling us to say yes to God's plan over our own.

This Christmas, let's remember that Jesus saves us from our sin and offers us true freedom to live life to the fullest as his disciples.

But may it not be also helpful to encounter some blessing by recalling that for you, for me, God became life-size in the person of Jesus, to be with us, and “save us from our sins.” We may not have the date precisely correct when it all took place, but this week when we celebrate the birth of “God With Us,” might be some hopeful news that not only does the name Jesus mean, “God saves,” but that just as importantly that God is with us, to go through our pain that we might not be so alone.

The birth of Jesus pushes us toward a response, a response of faith, courage, and obedience.

God has picked you, like he picked Joseph—and Mary—because he knows that you are far beyond an average Joe.

· That as innkeepers, you will find a place for the Christ child
· That as seekers of the truth, you will be wise enough to follow a star
· That as shepherds, you will be open to miracles,
· That like Mary, you will surrender to the will of God
· That like Joseph, you will live righteously, compassionately, and faithfully

When this happens, you can be sure that there’ll be nothing average about any of us, because the God whose birth in human flesh we remember on this week, is not an average, but an awesome, God.

Then, as 2016 draws to a close and we are looking forward to 2017, even with the uncertainty of not knowing what the future holds, we remember Immanuel, God is with us. We never travel alone. We are always in the presence of God.

Living into the names of "He adds," "the rebellious / beloved one," "He saves" and "God with us," we grow into God's desire for our lives.

**Commentary on Matthew**

Each of the four evangelists begins his gospel in a way which sets the stage for the subsequent narrative portrait of Jesus. Mark breaks into it abruptly, as if the reader has entered an already unfolding story. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus is in a hurry -- doing everything "immediately" -- and the gospel ends as quickly as it began. John begins with a lofty prologue, a meditation on "the Word" which enters the world. As the Word, Jesus has cosmic proportions and an eternal timeframe, and the gospel proceeds according to this heavenly model. But if one is curious about what Jesus was doing between the beginning of time and his baptism in the Jordan, one must turn to Luke or Matthew, who both offer infancy narratives. Luke's gospel situates the birth of Jesus in the annals of world history and traces his genealogy all the way back to Adam. For Luke, Jesus is the pivot of history and the key to God's universal offer of salvation to all, whether Jew or Gentile. But, although Matthew gestures toward a Gentile mission at some points of his gospel, he has a different emphasis in his infancy narrative. For Matthew, Jesus is the legitimate Jewish Messiah.

The first two chapters of Matthew prepare the reader to encounter Jesus as the Jewish Messiah by answering two questions about him: Who is he from? (chapter 1) and where is he from? (chapter 2). All of chapter 1 deals with the who of his birth origins. Both the genealogy from Abraham to Jesus (vv. 1-17) and the following account of his birth (vv. 18-25) are labeled by the same Greek noun (genesis), although they are translated differently in the NRSV ("genealogy" and "birth"). The genealogy establishes Jesus' lineage as a Jew, tracing him back to Abraham, and, moreover, as a Jew with royal blood, tracing him back to David. In ancient Judaism, David and his descendants were regarded as explicitly related to God as sons to a father (based on interpretations of 2 Samuel 7:14, among other texts). "Son of David" was thus a royal messianic title, and one which dovetailed appropriately with the title "son of God" because of David's filial relationship to God. Altogether, Matthew uses the title "son of David" 10 times in his gospel, compared to four times each in Mark and Luke and none in John. But only here in Matthew is someone other than Jesus addressed by the title, when the angel addresses "Joseph, son of David."

Krister Stendahl has called Matthew 1:18-25 an "enlarged footnote to the crucial point in the genealogy." Matthew has just established Jesus' messianic eligibility as a Jewish descendant of David, but he has still to explain the last step in the family tree -- the legitimacy of Jesus' birth. As early as the second century, we have documented evidence of non-Christians questioning the legitimacy of Jesus' lineage. Several sources report that he was slandered as "Jesus son of Pantera," which was a pun on the Greek word for virgin, present here in 1:23 (Parthenos/parthenin). In addition, Pantera was a plausible name for a Roman man and was popular among soldiers. It is possible that rumors like this were circulating already at the time of Matthew's composition, especially given the low profile given to Joseph in NT texts (he is mentioned only in Matthew and Luke, and only at the beginnings of each). Furthermore, Matthew has demonstrated elsewhere that he is sensitive to rumors and wants to quell them with his gospel (see 28:11-15). So how does he confirm Jesus' legitimacy?

Matthew clearly distinguishes between the marriage betrothal and the marriage consummation of Mary and Joseph. Mary is promised to Joseph and is in some way under his care, but he cannot yet have been the biological father of Jesus. Neither is any other man the father of Jesus; rather the child Jesus is "from the Holy Spirit" (v. 18). But it would be overly simplistic to consider the Holy Spirit as a "father" to Jesus. The Holy Spirit is not a male begetting force either in Greek (the noun is neuter) or Hebrew usage (the noun is feminine). If Matthew had wanted to depict the conception of Jesus as a union between a god and a human, he would have had ample ways to do so. Greek and Roman literature abounded with such tales. Instead, Matthew presents the Holy Spirit as a creative, if ambiguous, force. It is thus noteworthy that in Matthew, the presentation of Jesus as a "Son of God" is not part of the infancy narrative (as it is in Luke 1:35). Rather, Matthew presents Jesus first as a son of David, a legitimate Jewish Messiah.

Matthew's version of the birth narrative is centered on Joseph, while Luke's version follows the story of Mary. In addition to his role as a "son of David," Joseph is presented as "a righteous man" (v. 19) put in a difficult situation by the revelation of his pregnant fiancée. In addition, he is not vindictive toward Mary, although the text is not absolutely clear why he was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." Was he righteous (in a merciful way) and therefore unwilling to expose her (because he thought it would be wrong)? Or was he righteous (in a law-abiding way) and yet unwilling to expose her (even though he thought he should)? The Greek is open to both interpretations. Finally, Joseph is the one who receives the angelic visitors and the right to name the boy Jesus (whereas these are afforded to Mary in Luke 1:26-31).

Matthew does not anchor Jesus' legitimacy only in the circumstances of his miraculous birth; he also marshals scriptural texts to demonstrate God's providential involvement. The citation of Isaiah 7:14 is the first of five different prophecies fulfilled in Matthew 1-2. These interpretations depart far from the original context of the prophecies in the OT. They should probably not be interpreted, however, as attempts to discredit other (non-Christian) interpretations of the same passages. Although it is tempting to see Matthew in an apologetic squabble with non-Christian Jews of his day, one can see elsewhere what he is like when he takes sides in the Jewish-Christian identity battle of the late first century (see Matthew 23!). Rather, these prophecy fulfillments should be read along with Raymond Brown (The Birth of the Messiah [New York: Doubleday, 1993], 97-98): "A more plausible explanation is that the formula citations had a didactic purpose, informing the Christian readers and giving support to their faith. Some of the citations are attached to the minutiae of Jesus' career, as if to emphasize that the whole of Jesus' life, down to the last detail, lay within God's foreordained plan."

1. "Top celebrity baby names." What to Expect: Pregnancy and Parenting Every Step of the Way. Whattoexpect.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Blickley, Leigh. "Celebrities who've changed their names for fame." The Huffington Post Website. HuffingtonPost.com, April 29, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rev. Richard E. Stetler, http://www.stmatthews-bowie.org/Worship/Sermons/2003/sermon\_12\_21\_03.asp. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)