
WHAT'S IN A NAME?

It's pretty rare when this Sunday, the Name of JESUS, is celebrated.

- It is considered a lesser festival and only occurs when January 1 falls on a Sunday.
- But I think there is tremendous value in thinking about what the name of JESUS means and what it means for us to know it.

So, were kind of starting where we left off Christmas Eve.

- We hear that the shepherds went to see the thing about which the angels had told them,
 - the baby that was born in a stable.
- Then they returned praising GOD and telling everyone they encountered about what they had seen and heard.
 - And that was probably a number of people, since the city was full of folks who had come to register as the Roman government had required,
 - and none of them were home celebrating Christmas, because, well, Christmas had just happened—moments before.

But today, were given one more verse, verse 21:

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, HE was named JESUS, the name the angel had given HIM before HE was conceived.

- Remember, we heard that just two weeks ago.
- The angel visited Joseph and told him that Mary's baby was part of GOD'S plan,
 - and that he, Joseph, should give the baby the name of JESUS,
 - which today, we heard he did.
- And that passage from two weeks ago also tells us this name, JESUS, means "GOD saves."

So, let me share some thoughts on what the name of JESUS means for us.

First, a theological point I want to make regarding JESUS, through whom GOD saves.

- When you think about JESUS and HIS sacrifice for us, at what point does GOD love us?
 - Before or only after the cross?
- That may seem an odd question and likely one you've never thought specifically about.

But many people today believe that we are not loved of GOD until and only after JESUS, the ONE who saves, dies for us.

- It's sort of like, GOD doesn't want to go near us until that awful stench of sinfulness gets removed by JESUS' death,
 - and then GOD can finally love us.

But I think that's wrong.

- First of all, it raises all kinds of questions about all those people who lived before JESUS came.
 - How does GOD feel about them since they lived and died before JESUS made HIS great sacrifice on the cross?

I believe, and what I find repeatedly throughout the scriptures, both Old and New Testament, is that GOD always loves us.

- Even when we sin.
 - It doesn't mean that GOD likes what we do.
 - But it doesn't change the fact that GOD loves us.

If you go back to the story of the fall of humanity in Genesis, after the first couple eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, GOD sends them out of the garden as an act of judgement.

- But GOD also clothes them as an act of love.

When the Israelites get to the Promised Land the first time, they doubt that GOD, who has brought them out of their slavery, will lead them in into that land safely because of the enemies that dwell within.

- As a judgement, they end up wandering in the wilderness for forty years.
 - But then, GOD, in love, does bring them into the Promised Land and does so in triumph over those enemies.

When the Prodigal Son returns home, his father doesn't wait for his confession of guilt before he starts loving him again.

- The father always loved his rebellious son and, upon his return, reinstates him to his place in the family.

JESUS coming into our world as "GOD saves" is not done so that GOD will love us.

- It happens because GOD loves us, and always has, and always will,
 - and to further show that love, JESUS dies on the cross so that our sin is taken away and our place in GOD'S household is restored.
 - GOD saves because GOD loves us, not so that GOD can or will love us.
 - The name of JESUS should remind us of GOD'S love for us.
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Second, there's power in the name of JESUS.

Noel Richards has written a song with that message.

- Its lyrics go like this:

*There is power in the name of JESUS.
We believe in HIS name.
We have called on the name of JESUS;
we are saved! We are saved!*

*At HIS name the demons flee.
At HIS name captives are freed.
For there is no other name that is higher
than JESUS!*

*There is power in the name of JESUS,
like a sword in our hands.
We declare in the name of JESUS,
we shall stand! We shall stand!*

*At HIS name GOD'S enemies
shall be crushed beneath our feet.
For there is no other name that is higher
than JESUS!*

When we call on the name of JESUS we are, first of all, admitting that there is much we are powerless to do.

- There is much about which we are helpless on our own.
 - But, in the name of JESUS, we can accomplish so much.
- In Acts 3 a man, lame from birth speaks to Peter and John.
- He asks them for money to help pay for his needs.
 - Peter replies, "Silver of gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of JESUS CHRIST of Nazareth, walk."
 - Peter then helps him to his feet and he finds he can walk, by the power of JESUS' name.

By the name of JESUS, we can help the hungry to eat.
By the name of JESUS, we can help the sick to receive care.
By the name of JESUS, we can help homeless to have shelter.
By the name of JESUS, we can help the lonely to find community,
By the name of JESUS, we can help the desperate to have hope.
- There is power in the name of JESUS.

The third thing I want to share about the name of JESUS is that in that name, we can find our true identity.

I've told the story before, but I want to share it again.

Years ago, I came to know a man called Otis Woodard, a black man from St. Louis.

- Otis (and he insists that you call him that) runs a home for pregnant teenage girls in connection with Lutheran Social Services of Missouri.
 - At the time I met Otis, he had delivered more than one hundred babies.

Otis also is the father of seven children of his own,

- two daughters, Bridget and Rochelle, and five sons, Otis, Otis, Otis, Otis, and Otis.
 - Oh, and the dog, a male, is called Otis.

Otis says it's confusing at times to have seven in the household with the name Otis, but his wife like it.

- When she calls to Otis, not only does he come, but all five of the boys. And the dog.

You see, it is a tradition in Otis' family going all the way back to slave times to name all the men Otis.

- Slaves could be sold off to different plantations and the only way you could keep track of family identity was to give the boys all the same name.
 - Otis went to a family reunion once where there was more than 300 Otis Woodards.

When each of Otis' sons starts high school, he sits them down and says, "You have my name, and I expect you to take good care of it.

- "I have worked hard to make the name Otis Woodard mean something in this community.
 - "Anything you do going forward reflects on me, because you're doing it with my name, and it reflects on all your brothers, too."

How true that is for us who claim the name Christian for ourselves.

- If we take the name of CHRIST for our identity, as we do in baptism, anything we do reflects back on all those who share that name.
 - That's why I always cringe when I hear of Christians acting in ways that are not how I believe JESUS wants us to serve.
- But we also have to remember that anything we do also reflects back on HIM whose name we have taken upon ourselves.
 - There's a saying that there are two reasons why someone is not a believer.
 - Either they have never met someone who is a Christian, or they have.
- How we live, how we tell others about our LORD, says something about our fellow Christians and, most of all, about JESUS.
- Let us seek to live our lives as Christians in such a way that others may come to know that, when it comes to JESUS, there's something in a name.