

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Title: "Such names for a Human Being" or "Never Alone Again"

"You shall call His name Jesus ... His name shall be called Immanuel."

In the prologue to her Christmas story, Dorothy Sayers has the wise men come on stage and express their longings as they set out on their journey to Bethlehem. One of the wise men (whom Ms. Sayers names Balthazar) expresses the feelings of countless human beings this Advent-Christmas season.

"All I ask is the assurance that I am not alone,
Some courage, some comfort against this burden of fear and pain.

...

About my palaces the jungle creeps and whines;
Famine and plague are my fireside companions;
And around the circle of the fire, the glare of human eyes.
The lion sits by the water-hole, where the women go down to wash,
In the branches crouches the leopard.
I look out between the straggling branches of the vine and see
Fear in the east, fear in the west; armies
And banners marching and garments rolled in blood.
Yet this is nothing if only God will not be indifferent,
If He is beside me, bearing the weight of His own creation;
If I may hear His voice among the voices of the vanquished,
If I may feel His hand touch mine in the darkness,
If I may look upon the hidden face of God
And read in the eyes of God
That He is acquainted with grief."

("He That Cometh")

The angel said to Joseph, "You shall call His name Jesus... His name shall be called Immanuel."

According to Matthew the tax-collector this is what happened the first Advent-Christmas. Joseph, a young man (perhaps in his late 20's) discovered that his fiancé, Mary, was pregnant. Joseph knew that her pregnancy was not his doing!! The only "logical" conclusion to reach, the only "logical" explanation was that Mary had broken the terms of their engagement and was involved with another man. Joseph felt that he could no longer trust her. And since trust is at the heart of marriage, he decided to end their relationship. But because he cared about Mary's reputation in the village, he planned to do so secretly, quietly.

While wrestling with his plan one night, an angel spoke to him in a dream. (By the way: sometimes we need to grapple with this dimension of the Biblical revelation: what are we

to make of the place angels have in God's world?) The angel says to Joseph: "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." Why? Because, "that which has been conceived in her (or begotten in her), is of the Holy Spirit" (1:20). Mary's pregnancy is not the result of sexual intercourse or of inter-uterine implantation. Mary's pregnancy is the result of the work of the Spirit of the Living God.

Matthew wrote his gospel for people who were steeped in the Jewish Scriptures. The mention of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, would immediately trigger certain ideas in the Jewish mind. In particular, the idea of the creative activity of God. And the Biblical text that would immediately come to mind is Genesis chapter one, verses one and two. There, "in the beginning," the Spirit of God is depicted as "hovering over the surface of the waters" bringing the world we know into being. To the first century Jewish mind the Spirit of God is God Himself creating and giving life.

That the Holy Spirit is involved in the conception of Mary's Baby could mean only one thing. The Creator was affecting a New Beginning, the Living God was bringing into being a brand New Creation; something that had never existed before.

And in the text before us today, we are taken into the heart of this New Creation. "You shall give Him the name Jesus" (1:21). "His name shall be called Immanuel" (1:22).

Names in the 1st century meant so much more than they do in our century. A person's name was carefully chosen, for the name was intended to make a statement... a statement about the person's essential self. A name was a sort of mini "personality profile", a kind of "character reference." "Joseph... you shall give the Spirit-be-gotten child the name Jesus... His name shall be called Immanuel."

"Jesus." An ordinary human name. Many mothers in the first century gave their sons that name; mother mothers still do. "Jesus" is the English for the Greek "Iesous." "Iesous" is the Greek for the Hebrew "Yeshua," often translated as "Joshua." And here is the fact we need to know to appreciate what is going on in the naming of Mary's son. "Yeshua" is a short form of "Ye-ho-shuah". "Ye-ho-shuah" means "Yahweh is the One who saves." Or more dynamically, "Yahweh-to-the-rescue." You shall give Him the name "Yahweh-to-the-rescue."

Now, other children bearing this name were signs, or statements of faith, that God saves. What Matthew is wanting us to know about this Yeshua, this boy, is that He is not just a sign; He is the thing signified. Because this Yeshua, literally, "out of the Spirit of Yahweh," is somehow Yahweh in person; He is literally Yahweh-to-the-rescue!

That Matthew intends for us to think in this way is made clear by the explanation for giving Jesus the name "Jesus". Matthew reports the angel saying, and here I will translate literally, "You are to give Him the name Jesus, because... because/ He Himself will save His people from their sins." Matthew 1:21 - "He Himself - He Himself will save..." Who is this "Himself"? Who is this person who is Himself the Savior of His people? Over and over again the thing God says through the Jewish prophets, "I, even I, am Yahweh; and there is

no savior besides me” (Isaiah 43:11, etc.). Only God can save. Only the Creator can redeem. “You are to give Mary’s baby the name Jesus, because He Himself will save....” The angel can make such a startling statement because this Jesus, this Yeshua, is the one Jesus who is in fact what His name means. This Jesus, this Yeshua, is in the most literal sense of the word “Yahweh Himself to the rescue.”

And He is to be named “Immanuel.” Other mothers called their children by this name too; and still do. While living in Los Angeles, we took in a young man named Immanuel. Matthew quotes Isaiah who spoke of some child in Isaiah’s time who was given this name. But again, that child was only a sign, a statement of faith, that somehow God-is-with-us. But *this* child, Mary’s boy-child, is not just a sign. He is the thing signified. Because He is “of the Spirit of God,” “out of the Spirit of God,” He is God-in-Person, God-with-us. Or as both the Hebrew and Greek should be rendered, he is the with-us-God. *Immanu* means “with-us.” *El* means God! His name is not El-Immanu, but Immanu-El. He is the with-us-God.

I will never tire of proclaiming the wonder and mystery of the names. “Give Him the name Jesus, Immanuel. Give Him the name Yahweh-to-the-rescue, the with-us God.” The names declare the incredible news.... The incredibly good news... that the Living God has come to us in person!!!

I like how the Nicene Creed expresses it: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ... God of God, Light of light, very God of very God... Who for us and our salvation came down ... and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary.” The good news is not simply that the Invisible One has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth. The good news is that the Invisible One has come to us as Jesus of Nazareth. As Jesus! As Jesus! As Jesus. Martin Luther could therefore say: “I know no other God but Him who once lay in Mary’s arms.” “Name Him Jesus, Immanuel; Yahweh-Himself-to-the-rescue, the with-us-God.”

“Shepherds in their fields abiding,
watching o’er their flocks by night,
God with us is now abiding,
Yonder shines the infant light.” God!

“Christ, by highest heaven adored;
Christ, the Everlasting Lord!
Late in time behold Him come
offspring of the Virgin’s womb;
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity.” Godhead see!

How right it was that shepherds knelt before Mary’s baby! How appropriate it was that wise men fell in adoration before Mary’s little boy! “Give Him the name Jesus, Immanuel; Yahweh-Himself-to-the-rescue, the with-us-God.”

Now, Matthew puts the story of the namings at the beginning of the Gospel to make sure we read the rest of his Gospel correctly. That is, Matthew intends for us to read the rest of

what he writes through the lenses of the names. As we turn the pages of his book... and of Mark's, Luke's, John's book and watch Mary's Son relate to real people in real life situations, we are to say to ourselves, "this is Yahweh-Himself-to-the-rescue doing this", "this is the with-us-God doing that

And when we do, we make at least three life-changing discoveries. Which I want to hold before us on this Sunday before Christmas.

First, we discover that the Living God embraces the ordinary, mundane realities of life on this planet; the Living God dignifies the normal routines of life.

This is clear right from the beginning, in the stable on that 'holy night'. My friend Don McCullough writes: "Had we been in the stable that night in Bethlehem, I doubt we would have witnessed the scene in the way many artists have since pictured it. No smiling baby crowned with a golden halo there; no aura of other worldliness; no angelic cantatas descending from the rafters. Just a red and wrinkled baby who cried when he wanted milk and messed his pants when he got it. Mark Twain candidly observed in "Answers to Correspondence" that 'a soiled baby with a neglected nose cannot be conscientiously regarded as a thing of beauty'. Quite true. The word became not a thing of beauty, but flesh – as we know it and love it" (Incarnation and Institution", the Christian Century, Dec 23rd 1981) In Bethlehem's stable the Living God embraces and dignifies the mundane.

Do you know what the first theological heresy that the Christian church had to wrestle through? Not the denial of the Divinity of Jesus. The first heresy was the denial of the full humanity of Jesus. The first heresy was Docetism. Docetism held that Jesus, Immanuel only "appears" to be human. Docetism resists the full incarnation of God. This heresy still rears its head among us, chiefly so, in driving a wedge between the so-called "spiritual" life and the so-called "secular" life; between a "religious" life and a "normal" life as we have to live it in a broken world. Life in the Holy Spirit is thought to be lived only in worship services and prayer meetings, while washing dishes, caring for children, being responsible workers, are thought to be distractions from the "spiritual" life. In the incarnation the Living God forever bridges the gaps and brings the two together. The events of Advent and Christmas say that the authentically spiritual life is very earthly. I like how Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: "In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in one without the other". John Stackhouse works this out more fully in "Making the Best of It". In the birth of Mary's Spirit- Conceived Son, the Living God embraces our ordinary flesh and blood existence. The oxen needed straw, the donkeys needed water, and Yahweh-the –God-with-us needed to be fed and rocked and changed.

Second, when we read the Gospels through the lenses of the names, we discover that God goes further and identifies with the harsh realities of life on this planet. There he is Yahweh to the rescue emerging from the womb, going through the trauma that is birth. There He is – Immanuel – clutched in the arms of Joseph. As he and Mary flee the city, escaping this insane decree of Herod that all boys two-years-old and younger be killed. There He is the virtuous God a 12-year-old boy in trouble with His mother because He sought to understand Himself independent of her and Joseph. There He is Yahweh-to-the-rescue

alone in the desert for forty days, hungry and thirsty, in face to face encounter with the powers of evil, being tested, more fiercely than any of us ever have or will. There He is Immanuel – walking into leprosy colonies, touching the limbs and faces of people others dare not touch. There He is – the-with-us –God laughing and singing and eating with outcasts, befriending prostitutes and dishonest tax-collectors. There He is, Yahweh-the Holy-One being criticized and jeered at by the religious establishment for such reckless love. There He is in the synagogue being misunderstood by the theological elite, scorned and hated by the very folk who should have welcomed Him. There He is exhausted and weary after a long day of teaching. There He is Yahweh-Himself-come –to-save in the garden of Gethsemane, wrestling with having to do what He does not want to have to do, but knowing that He must do it. There He is –God- alone, deserted by his friends – agonizing long into the night over the cost of obedience in this world. There He is in the Roman Headquarters, the victim of the miscarriage of justice. There He is hearing the false testimony against Him being accepted by the court. There He is God, God forced to His knees being spat upon and whipped by soldiers. There He is –Yahweh-to –the rescue – at Golgotha nails being pounded into His hands and feet, flesh ripping and bones snapping as they drop His cross into the holding place. There He is who knew no sin becoming sin and absorbing in Himself all that sin justly deserves. There He is dying. God dying. God! There He is in the stone cold darkness and silence we call death.

Read the Gospels through the lens of the names and we discover that the Living God fully identifies with “the real world”. Which is why we can trust Him when He speaks to us. He not only knows what He is talking about, He knows what it means to live out in one world, the Living God knows what it means to be human!

Third, when we read the Gospels through the lens of the names, we discover that God does more than embrace and identify with. God feels the realities of life on this planet. The Living God feels. The Invisible One feels. This is truly astounding.

Most religions affirm four major attributes of God. Most religions affirm that God is infinite, God is incomprehensible, God is invisible, God is impassible, non-feeling, or, as the Greeks put it, God is a-pathetic, non-passionate. In the Greek philosophical tradition, which has influenced much of Western Christianity, God cannot feel because it would mean that God can be affected by something outside God’s Self. In the Greek philosophical tradition God must not be moved by anything else, for that would, in the Greek mind, imply that God is somehow subject to reality outside God’s Self.

Therefore, God, to be God, cannot experience emotions whether pleasant or painful. To feel would mean being less than the Absolute. The Buddhist tradition never attributes “feeling’ to the Divine. To feel is to still be caught up in the “veil of illusions”. The Islamic tradition holds the view of a non-feeling God. When a Muslim suffers he or she suffers for Allah but never with Allah.

When the living God enters the world through the virgin’s womb, God breaks open all the philosophical and religious boxes and feels. God voluntarily embraces, God voluntarily

identifies with, and God voluntarily feels the realities of our lives. (I owe the voluntarily to Moltmann). The God of Advent-Christmas feels for and feels with.

As I have pointed out on other occasions, Matthew uses a strong word to convey the level at which God-with-us feels. It is the word “splangkna”. A visceral word too weakly translated as “compassion”. It is the word translated in other Biblical texts as “bowels” or “guts”. It refers to the inner parts of our bodies where we feel our deepest and most intense emotions. The “splangkna” are the places where we experience those emotions that clutch at us, that wrench and rip.

Read the Gospels through the lenses of the names! There He is –Yahweh-to-the rescue-wrenched by the masses of people aimlessly wandering like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). There He is – the-with-us-God – torn up by the grief of a widow on her way to bury her dead son (Luke 7:13). In each of those cases, Jesus responds the way He does, not to prove He is Immanuel, but because as Immanuel, He feels the pain.

There He is God-with-us at the grave of His good friend Lazarus. Immanuel stands at the grave. So deeply moved, as John tells it, that He weeps uncontrollably, His chest heaving with sorrow. The verb ‘deeply moved’ is another vivid, visceral word. It does not simply mean to feel sorry. Literally it means, to snort in spirit”. It was used (in classical Greek) to describe a horse preparing to enter into battle, rearing up on its front legs, pawing in the air, snorting. At the grave of Lazarus Yahweh-to-the –rescue snorts in spirit. Os Guinness captures it best: “Jesus was moved deeply in the sense of a furious inner anger. For, entering His Father’s world as the Son of God, He found not order, beauty, harmony and fulfillment, but fractured disorder, raw ugliness, complete disarray – everywhere the abortion of God’s plan. Standing at the gravesite, he came face to face with the death that symbolized and summarized the accumulation of evil, pain, sorrow, suffering, injustice, cruelty and despair. Thus, while he was moved to tears in sorrow for His friends, He was also deeply moved by the outrageous abnormality of death.” Immanuel’s heart breaks with what breaks ours.

So Henri Nouwen can say, “ When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled. The ground of all love burst open and the abyss of God’s immense inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself” (Compassion, 17) the Living God feels the pain of the world.

Which is why when you know Jesus, Immanuel you need not run from pain: He is there with us in pain. Indeed, when you know Jesus, Immanuel you can dare to enter into other’s pain: He is there in the pain. When Scripture exhorts us to “weep with those who weep” and “rejoice with those who rejoice”, we are only being exhorted to do what the centre of the universe is doing. “All I ask is the assurance that I am not alone, some courage, some comfort against the burden of fear and pain.”

Fear in the east, fear in the west...
Yet this is nothing if only God will not be indifferent,
If He is beside me, bearing the weight of His own creation;

If I may look upon the hidden face of God
And read in the eyes of God
That He is acquainted with grief.”

“You shall give Him the name Jesus. His name shall be called Immanuel.”

The pastoral team have been praying for those of you who have lost loved ones this past year, for whom this Christmas may be actually painful. There is a hole, an absence a gut-wrenching absence. As I have prayed for you by name . . . some of you I see even now.. A verse from the hymn :Crown Him with many Crowns” keeps coming to my soul. It is not found in most hymnals so I have it written on the front pages of my Bible. It goes like this: “Crown Him the Son of God Before the world began, And ye, who tread where He hath trod, Crown Him the Son of Man; Who every grief hath known that wrings the human breast, And takes and bears them as His own, that all in Him may rest.”

God is in the hole. God is in the absence. Our Maker bears the grief with us. The Maker of all things bears the grief of the whole world. “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given” A child, a Son who is in the most exact sense of the words. All that His name implies. Call Him “Jesus”. For He is Yahweh the Holy One come to rescue us from all the consequences of sin. And call Him “Immanuel” for He is the Eternal Creator come to us as one of us to be for us the with-us-God...Now and forever more.

Merry Christmas.