

“JESUS? WHAT SORT OF A NAME IS THAT?”

A Sermon for The Name of Jesus, January 1, 2017

Text: Luke 2:15-21

Luke reports that when Mary and Joseph named their baby they called him “Jesus” because the angel had told them to. Before he was born.

If you go back to chapter one of Luke, the angel said: “You will name him Jesus.” And “he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.” And, “He will be called the Son of God.” What Luke does not do is explain why Jesus should be called “Jesus.”

However, Matthew does tell us why. He says that the angel said to Joseph that Mary would “bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

The angel says there is a reason for this name. “Jesus” is the right name for this baby. So, if you ran into someone named Jesus, you would of course suspect that the person was sent to save his people from their sins. “Name and nature are one.”

Christine’s grandfather was Walter FLINT Susan. His father was Charles FLINT Susan. (The name “Flint” is a reference to her great-great-grandmother Esther FLINT.) I think it may have been at the christening of Walter Flint that someone was heard to say “Flint?—that’s a hard name for a little baby.” So they softened it, by making it his middle name.

Well, I think “Jesus” is “a hard name for a baby.” Or a child. Or anybody. Don’t you wonder whether other children teased him for having a name that means “savior”? When they played baseball, would they always have Jesus bat cleanup? When they got in trouble, would they ask him to bail them out?

The name “Jesus” doesn’t just mean “savior,” though. It is the English form of the Greek “Iesous,” which is the Greek form of the Aramaic word “Yeshua,” which is an abbreviated form, sort of like a

nickname for “Yehoshua” or Joshua. And Yehoshua means “The Lord saves.” “Yahweh saves.”

So anyone could be named “Jesus” or “Yeshua” as a reminder that the Lord delivers his people. When you called a child to come in for supper (“Yoo-hoo, Jesus!”) you reminded the neighbors of the exodus, or the return from exile, or all the other times in your people’s history when the Lord had stepped in and saved his chosen people.

However, in Jesus’ case, the angel’s announcement in Matthew put a twist on this name. Jesus really was supposed to save his people. Himself. As the Son of God, the Son of the Most High, Jesus was not merely a souvenir of deliverance past. He was the hope for the future.

The first of three keys to understanding what the angel announced to Joseph in Matthew 1 is the word “their.”

“He will save his people from their sins.”

If you keep that in mind, you will understand the book of Matthew, the story of an unpopular savior.

Why should a savior have a tough life? Why should a savior be killed by the very people he came to save? Why should a savior meet with opposition and rejection?

Because the savior everybody always wants; the popular sort of savior; is the savior who saves his people from the sins of others. Such saviors are wonderful. They include Moses and Joshua and Ehud the left-handed man and Gideon and King David and King Cyrus and a thousand others. God frequently anointed individuals to save their people from the sins of others.

But this one? This Jesus did not come to save his people from the sins of others. He came to save them from their own sins.

That is not the way of superheroes or champions either according to the Bible or according to the movies. Heroes save earth from aliens. They save good citizens from criminals. They save the poor people from the rich people. They deliver the oppressed from the oppressors. They save us from the people who hate us. They save us from others, not from ourselves.

But our Lord Jesus was called Jesus because he would save people from their own sins. He came to save us from what is wrong, not with the world, but with us. Because what is wrong with us is what is actually wrong with the world. And whenever Jesus saves us from what is wrong in us, he saves others from us!

And that is not just what the angel said about Jesus. It's also what Jesus did. He saw how people always operate from the assumption that other people are the problem. But he stopped us from judging them like that, saying "Judge not." He commanded us not to pick little things out of the eyes of others, since we have large things in our own. He told people who wanted to stone someone for sinning, that "he who is without sin" should cast the first stone, thereby reminding everyone of their own sins.

The giants of the Old Testament who spoke for God and led the people of Israel were regarded as saviors of their people because they slew Amorites or made it rain. The prophets who spoke for God and denounced the leaders of Israel were not saviors of their people. On the contrary, they generally made them feel quite a bit worse when they were done. Critics are not saviors, although criticism does help.

But Jesus did not save his people from the Romans. And although he criticized his people plenty, he was not finished with them when they saw their sin. He took the next step, and forgave them. He released

them from captivity to their sins, bondage to their past. He set them free. As free from sin as the Hebrew people were free from sin once they crossed the Red Sea. He was the great liberator—of all those who were willing to receive the freedom he offered.

He will be called Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

The second key to understanding why Jesus is called "Jesus" is the word "his." He will save his people.

In the beginning, it seemed that he was sent only to (as he put it himself) "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the way Jesus saved—through forgiveness—meant that his salvation worked not only for them but for Gentiles, who, it turned out, also need to be saved from their sins!! Fancy that!! It turned out that "his people," in the case of Jesus, were not just people born in Nazareth or Galilee or Judea, but people born anywhere. Every single person in the world—except of course for people who have no sin.

And in saving not only Jews but also Gentiles from their sins, by making them all "his" people, he brought us together. He made friends of enemies. His love was for all, his salvation was for all, and so whoever received him received power to become children of the one God who sent him in the first place.

"He shall be called Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

The third key in this simple sentence is the word "he," referring to Jesus.

Saving people from their sins remains the work not of specialist heroic supersaints, or clergy, but Jesus Christ. God comes to us in Christ Jesus, even at this very table, and offers himself for our sins, to take them away. God does it, lest any of us should boast. God does it for each and every one of us—God saves us from our sins, through Jesus Christ our Lord. And does it in a way that unites us all in humble

repentance and joyful faith in his promises. We are free indeed.

All because a little baby was given a job to do, and the name to go with it: Jesus. The one who would save his people from their sins.

There is more to the story. People who are set free in Christ, people who become united with one another through their Lord Jesus, those people are set free so that we may love the world as he loved the world, not as though it is filled with enemies, but as though it is filled with opportunities to show our love to God. That part of the story you will write in your lives this year, as you live out your thanks to your Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.



Amen.

