***WHATCHA GONNA NAME THAT BABY?***

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Texts: Luke 2:21 and 1 Samuel 1:9-20

*The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker’s old broken-down toolhouse…I guess it was an accident. I don’t suppose they woke up that morning and said to one another, “Let’s go burn down Fred Shoemaker’s toolhouse”….but maybe they did. After all, it was a Saturday, and not much going on.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

So begins Barbara Robinson’s wonderful story, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. As many of you know, it is the story of a church Christmas pageant crashed by the Herdmans. The oldest Herdman kid, Imogene, ends up playing Mary, and her brother Ralph ends up being Joseph. It is a tale that is funny and profound, but also biblically insightful. At one point in a pageant rehearsal, Imogene announces,

*“I think I ought to tell them what (the baby’s) name is.”*

*“No.” (says the director, the narrator’s mother). “Besides, you remember it wasn’t Mary who named the baby.”*

*“I told you!” Ralph whacked Imogene on the back. “I named him.”*

*“Joseph didn’t name the baby either,” Mother said. “God sent an angel to tell Mary what his name should be.”*

*Imogene sniffed. “I would have named him Bill.…  
“Why didn’t they let Mary name her own baby?” Imogene demanded. “What did that angel do, just walk up and say, ‘Name him Jesus’?”*

*“Yes,” Mother said, because she was in a hurry to get finished.*

*But Alice Wendleken had to open her big mouth. “I know what the angel said,” Alice piped up. “She said, ‘His name shall be called Wonderful, counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.’’” I could have hit her.*

*“My God!” Imogene said. “He’d never get out of the first grade if he had to write all that!”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

What Imogene captures so well in that rehearsal is the reality of the naming of the baby Jesus. While most parents wrestle through about 150 names over the course of nine months until they arrive at a decision – and then perhaps change it three or four times after that – Mary and Joseph faced no such quandaries. Before the child was even conceived, the angel Gabriel had told the startled young mother-to-be, “*You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.*” According to Matthew, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him:

*Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

Mary may have wanted to name the baby Bill, and Joseph may have been hoping for Joe Jr., but the decision on the naming of this child was not theirs to make, any more than his coming was their choice. The decision had been divinely made for them; his name was to be Jesus. The only question was: would Mary and Joseph follow the instructions of the angels or go rogue and choose a name of their own?

That decision was akin to the decision Hannah had to make once little Samuel was born. Would she indeed fulfill the promise she had made in her prayerful plea to God for a child, a promise to dedicate him to the Lord? Or would she renege on her promise and keep this child for whom she had so long longed for herself? Her answer is foreshadowed in the name she chose for the child – *Samuel*, meaning “*He who is from God*”.[[3]](#endnote-3) He was a miracle child *from God*, and in fulfillment of her promise, Hannah dedicated him to God for service in the house of the Lord. Samuel’s name suggested his future: he was a gift from God who would speak and act for God as a prophet of the Lord, living into his name.

Not just for Hannah, but for all parents, naming a child is a significant decision. In the Bible study on Monday, folks shared stories of how their names were chosen by their parents – some in honor of family members, some in keeping with generations of family tradition, and a couple in tribute to movie stars of their generation. Perhaps your name was selected in such a way, or for some other reason – because your parents wanted a unique name like no other for you, or favored a name that was popular at the time, or preferred a biblical name, though notably the biblical names Mephibosheth, Jezebel, and Judas have not really caught on! Naming is something you rarely get to do for yourself; it is chosen for you. Sometimes that given name gets replaced by a nickname that sticks, for better or worse, but in most cases, the name itself is yours for a lifetime. You can, of course, make a legal name change; a friend of my grandfather, Joe S-H-I-T-T-Y (he pronounced it Shi-TEE), made a name change, though it was a little surprising that he just changed his name from Joe to Frank.

Neither *Frank* nor *Joe* was chosen because of the name’s meaning. For the most part, the meaning of names is no longer a consideration for parents. In some traditions though the meaning of the name is an important consideration, especially if there has been a significant change in life. Converts to Islam, for instance, often take on a name consistent with their new Muslim identity. So, Lew Alcindor became Kareem Abdul Jabbar, and Cassius Clay became Muhammed Ali. In biblical days, the meaning of names was of great importance, as for Samuel, and, new names were given, sometimes divinely given, to some of those chosen by the Lord for particular service. So, Abram and Sarai enter into a covenant relationship with God and become Abraham and Sarah. Saul persecutes Christians until his conversion on the Damascus Road when he is renamed Paul. Simon, the fisherman and disciple of Jesus, is declared to be the rock (the *petros*) upon which Christ will build the church and is renamed Peter. Not everyone in Scripture has a name chosen by God, but when it is given, it is because there is a particular role for that person in God’s plan.

From the very beginning, the child born of Mary had a critical part to play in God’s plan, and his naming by God as communicated through the angel to Mary and to Joseph affirmed that role. Jesus, *Yeshua* in the Hebrew, means “*The Lord saves*”, and this child would be the savior of the world. As the angel described it to Joseph in his dream, “*He will save his people from their sins*.” His name was a constant reminder of the purpose of his coming – not to condemn the world, but to save it! In naming the child *Jesus* as the angel instructed, Mary and Joseph proved themselves obedient to God and willing to fulfill their roles in God’s plan for salvation.

All those other names which so appalled Imogene Herdman – *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* – are titles which in one way or another describe who this child is. Across his life there are a host of others that will be added: *Messiah*, *Son of God*, *Lord*, and ultimately on the cross – *King of the Jews*. But those are later additions. His fundamental identity and purpose are embraced in that name given him by the One who sent him – *Jesus*, for the Lord saves! That is not to say that he alone bore that name; Jesus was not an uncommon name in 1st century Palestine. Uniquely this child lived into his name in fulfillment of the prophecies from prophets of old of One who would come to save God’s people. As his ministry, death, and resurrection proved, he came to save more than just *God’s people*; he came to save the world. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he affirmed that ALL people are God’s people whom he came to save. As John describes it in that much-loved and oft-quoted verse: “God so loved ***the world***, that God sent His only Son…” Not just the religious in the world, not just the righteous in the world, not just the saints, but also and especially the sinners and the outcasts and those in need of saving – which is all of us – are those whom this child comes to save. For, the Lord does indeed save! But save from what and for what?

The angel suggests that Jesus saves us from our sins, and his resurrection suggests he saves us from death as well in the promise of eternal life after death. But there is more! As theologian Cynthia Rigby describes it:

*The salvation with which we are gifted in and through Jesus Christ includes not only ‘fire insurance’ (i.e. escape from eternal punishment) but also a way of making sense of our day-to-day lives…To be aware of our salvation and to want to live more fully as those who are being met and made by God, is, I would say, close to whatever it means to be ‘saved.*’*…Salvation means living into the abundant life offered to us by Christ*.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Jesus comes to save us ***from*** our sinful past and ***into*** a loving, hope-filled future in which we are urged to participate as God’s children. We do that not only by celebrating his coming as we did this past week, but by doing as Hannah and Mary and Joseph did – by doing as God asks, by living and loving and serving as Jesus showed us, by answering the call to be disciples of the child born in Bethlehem who is the crucified and risen Lord, the One who lives into his name – Jesus – and saves us! Amen

1. Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, Harper & Row:1972, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id at 63-65 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Samuel1:20 fn in The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, Abingdon Press:2003, p.395 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith*, Abingdon Press:2018, pp.89, 171, 197 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)