

“The Name of Jesus”

Matthew 1:18-25

December 22, 2019

Naming a new baby can be a challenging process. It's hard to please everyone with a name. Dad might want a sports name, such as Aaron – for Aaron Rodgers. Mom might want a more fashionable, popular name such as Madison. Grandma might want a traditional, family name such as Helen or Bradley; while Grandpa might want a Biblical name such as Joshua or Mary. But once a name is selected, it takes on a certain fascination. A friend of mine chose his daughter's name by taking the first name of his mother-in-law (Mary) and the first name of his mother (Katherine), hoping that would satisfy each family, and then on a piece of paper he wrote: “Mary Katherine Tribble, Mary Tribble, Mary K. Tribble, M. Katherine Tribble, Dr. M. K. Tribble, The Honorable Mary Katherine Tribble, and finally President Mary K. Tribble.”

Mary and Joseph did not face the hassle of finding a name for their baby boy. That important matter was decided for them by God, and the message was delivered by an angel. Several months before Jesus was born, His earthly father, Joseph, faced a very difficult and troubling situation. He is told that his fiancé, Mary, is pregnant, and he knows that he is not responsible. I'm sure this hurt Joseph deeply as he believed that his fiancé had not been faithful to him. The law, according to Deuteronomy 22, was very clear on this subject. An engaged woman was to be treated the same as a married woman, and if a woman was guilty of adultery, she was to be stoned to death in front of her father's house. Mary says her pregnancy is from God, but Joseph certainly struggled with that explanation. After all, such an outrageous claim certainly deserves a skeptical response, and I don't think any man in Joseph's shoes would have reacted any differently. While Joseph did believe Mary that she was pregnant, he just didn't believe that she was pregnant with Christ Child. But Joseph loved Mary and he did not want to hurt or embarrass her, he didn't want her to die, so he decides to quietly break off the engagement.

Joseph's emotions remind me of a man who had a terrible argument with his wife. He came into work and decided that he wanted to make amends. So he ordered some flowers and told the florist that the card should read, “I'm sorry. I love you.” Unfortunately his instructions must not have been clear enough, because when the flowers arrived, there was no period on the card after the word, “sorry.” So instead of a card that should have read, “I'm sorry. I love you.” the card read, “I'm sorry I love you.” Well, that didn't exactly make things better; but that is probably how Joseph felt at first – sorry that he ever loved Mary. Just imagine what was going through his mind: Mary was asking him to believe that her child was mysteriously conceived. And even if he was, why would God (the creator of the world) choose an obscure peasant girl to bear the Savior of the world? Wasn't the Savior supposed to be a warrior king or a conquering hero? Where does a baby fit into all this, and why the tiny town of Bethlehem?

Immersed in these sad and confusing thoughts, Joseph then falls into a troubled sleep, and while he's sleeping, he has a dream. In the dream an angel informs him that Mary is telling the truth. Not only has she been faithful to him, but she has been faithful to God. He is told to go ahead and take Mary as his wife right away, because the child she would bear was conceived by the Holy Spirit; and he is also given the name of the baby. In verse 21 of our Gospel lesson the angel said to Joseph, “...you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The name “Jesus” means “the Lord saves” and his name certainly highlights the most important mission of His life: to save us from our sin and to restore our relationship with God. Jesus was the only baby in history born for the purpose of dying.

This is the time of the year that we hear a lot about the flu virus or other viruses that are being spread around, but there is one virus that is truly worse than the flu, and that is the virus of sin that infects 100% of humanity. The symptoms of the virus are everywhere: alcohol addiction, divorce, child neglect, lying, stealing, racism, family arguments, and the worship of money. Unless the sin virus is cured it will increasingly wreck our lives and separate us from God forever.

But the good news is that a cure has been found from the sin virus. God sent it through a baby, His Son, Jesus, born into a Bethlehem manger. How do you get the cure? Simply repent of your sin and claim this Jesus by faith as your Lord and Savior.

However, Satan is not happy at all about this, because the cure is free and available to everyone. Therefore, in order to keep us from the cure, Satan will suggest that we don't need to be saved by God. Satan reminds us

of our “good deeds” at this time of the year, such as “You give to the Salvation Army, you haven’t broken any laws (except for maybe speeding from the mall back to your home), you work hard, you volunteer, so who needs to be saved? You don’t need Jesus, your hard work will save you – your good deeds will get you into heaven.”

I heard a story about a man who had a conversation with his daughter who came home from college for Christmas break and she announced that she had been enlightened by a religion course at school. She told her parents, “I’m not interested in a God who saves me; I’m more attracted to a God who identifies with me.”

Her father then said to her, “Let me ask you a question. Imagine yourself on the top floor of your dormitory at school and the dorm building catches on fire. The stairs are blocked and it is too high for you to jump out of a window. When the firemen arrive and climb their ladders to your window, at that point do you want those firemen to save you or to just identify with you?” Our God became a human being and He experienced every emotion we experience – loneliness, anger, joy, laughter, and temptation – so He clearly identifies with us; but His purpose in becoming one of us was to die in order to save us from our sins. Again, the name “Jesus” means, “The Lord saves.”

We also read in this text about another name or title that God gave to His Holy Child – the name “Immanuel,” which means “God with us.” This is the only place in the New Testament where we find the word, “Immanuel,” and what I find interesting is that the very last words of the Gospel of Matthew make up the definition of the title, “Immanuel.” The very last words in the Book of Matthew, Jesus says, “Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

God’s plan to save us was truly brilliant in its simplicity. God would live among us and reveal Himself to a small group of common folk who would tell others what God had done in their lives. They, in turn, would tell others what they had experienced, and as the story of God’s coming is told over and over again, humanity would be won. Not with dramatic signs and wonders that would leave people unable to resist God, but with gentle love – the love of a baby. A humble man and woman, Joseph and Mary, put aside their own desires by showing extraordinary love and trust, as God entered into human existence. That’s pretty amazing, isn’t it? No wonder our city is lit up. No wonder music fills the air. It’s the most beautiful story in all the world. Christmas is upon us and all the world awaits the coming of the Lord.

My prayer for you this week is that you will catch the real Christmas spirit, which is a lot more than just some seasonal joy and charity. The real Christmas spirit is based on two important convictions: 1) This Jesus, born in Bethlehem, became one of us and clearly identifies with us. He is Immanuel, God with us. 2) This Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is the Son of God who sacrificed His perfect life so that we could be saved; after all “Jesus” means “The Lord Saves.” If these 2 truths cause you to be generous in special ways, such as giving to someone in need or giving up more of your time to worship in special services, then you have the real Christmas spirit. All that Jesus came to do is summarized in those 2 names: “Jesus – the Lord saves” and “Immanuel – God with us.” When you know and understand that, then you are truly ready for Christmas.