

AN AVERAGE JOE?

Matthew 1:18-25

A pregnant woman gets in a car accident and falls into a deep coma. Asleep for nearly six months, when she wakes up she sees that she is no longer pregnant and frantically asks the doctor about her baby. The doctor replies, "Ma'am you had twins! A boy and a girl. Your brother came in and named them." The woman thinks to herself, "No, not my brother ... he's an idiot!" She asks the doctor, "Well, what's the girl's name?" "Denise." "Wow, that's not a bad name, I like it! What's the boy's name?" "Denephew."

These days, parents often choose a name before a child is born, something that is possible because of ultrasounds. Even so, the formal naming of a child, beyond naming the child for the purposes of a birth certificate, comes after the child has been born. For many Christian parents, this happens at a baptism or christening. But many cultures have elaborate naming rituals.

I clearly remember when my younger sister Stephanie was born in 1959. I was 6 ½ years old at the time. It seems that Mom and Pop still had not yet chosen a name for their 5th child and 3rd daughter when she arrived on the scene. Out comes the baby book and the book of saints names. I guess you could call this the naming ritual in our family. As devout Roman Catholics, each child must be named after a saint – at least one of their names must pertain to a specific saint. For example, my birth name is Elizabeth Anne Françoise Gobertina von Trapp. Elizabeth was a popular Austrian name after St. Elisabeth of Hungary; Anne was after my godmother; Françoise because I was born on the feast of St., Frances de Sales, who, I learned many years later, is the patron saint of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing!

Not all parents have such guidelines to follow in naming their newborns. Parent's either seemed to be very creative or incredibly clueless that the name they give their child can one day have the potential of exposing the child to ridicule. Although, the likelihood of that happening in 2018 becomes less and less of a possibility. Hear just a few of the current names from the top names for boys in 2018 – Oliver, Harry, Jack, George and Noah. Then there are those who come up with names like Atley, Destiny, Acacia, Lively, Makenna, and River. But the name which will forever go down in history as the worst name for a daughter is that of then Governor Hogg of Texas – Ima Hogg!!

Fortunately, Joseph and Mary did not face this problem. They not only knew they were having a son, they had been told to name him Jesus! In today's passage we encounter four names: Joseph, Mary, Jesus and Immanuel. Each contains a key for helping us to live into our lives as Christians. The name Joseph comes from the Hebrew root Yosef, which means, "He will add," or "God increases."

In the Old Testament, we meet one named Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, the one who struggled with God. The special treatment Joseph received from his father and the large ego that developed from it, prompted his 11 brothers to sell him into slavery. Through a series of God-ordained circumstances, Joseph was appointed manager of the food supply of Egypt during a devastating famine. This Joseph showed God's increase in his personal life -- rising from slave to government official -- and in his public life by saving Israel when the famine threatened the nation with starvation.

Mary's fiancé Joseph is also a wonderful example of God's increase. When it would have been much easier to separate from Mary and the child she was having, Joseph listened to God and stayed with her. In ancient Israel, an engagement had the same status as marriage which is why the word divorce is often seen and used in this Biblical story. Joseph, however, didn't take matters into his own hands, but allowed God to work in his life, and the lives of Mary and their child. At the prompting of God, Joseph names the baby Jesus, takes his family to Egypt when threatened and brings them back when an angel tells him it is safe to do so. Joseph consistently gets out of the way to make room for God to do God's work in his life. He allows God to add to him, rather than trying to force his own will, even when God's plans completely alter the course of his life. We need to be more like Joseph, someone in whom the presence of God grows large.

The Gospel of Matthew is the only one of the four Gospels who includes Joseph in the birth narrative of Christ. We are much more familiar with the Gospel of Luke because it is one we hear just about every Christmas Eve. Poor Joseph really is given short shrift when it comes to recognition in the Bible. Today's lesson begins with the words, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way" (1:18). But Matthew could have easily replaced the word "birth" with "adoption," and the story would have been no less miraculous. It is truly remarkable that Joseph treated Jesus as a son, although he was not his biological father. Joseph showed true unselfishness, and a willingness to put his pride aside as he followed the will of God. He was no Average Joe. Matthew's text focuses on the critical role Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, played in this whole series of miraculous events.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, there is a moment when the entirety of God's messianic plan rests in the hands of this simple man, Joseph, and in his willingness to adopt Jesus as his son. Unlike Luke, Matthew traces Jesus' lineage back through Joseph's side of the family — establishing Jesus as "the son of David" and "the son of Abraham" by virtue of being — legally — Joseph's son. If Joseph had carried through his plans to "dismiss Mary quietly" (v. 19) when he discovered she was already pregnant, not only would Jesus have been illegitimate in the eyes of his culture, but, according to Matthew, he would have been without the validity of a Davidic heritage. In verse 19 Matthew sketches Joseph's character as one that is "righteous" as well as compassionate — for he was "unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace." But it is in verse 24 that Matthew reveals what he considers Joseph's most praiseworthy characteristic — obedience to God and acceptance of God's word. Yes, we need to be more like Joseph in our faith walks.

In every case when Matthew places Joseph in a situation that calls for his reaction to a divine prediction, Joseph accepts the word from God unquestionably, no matter what the consequences. In this very first instance, both the prediction itself and accepting the burden of the resulting consequences take no small act of faith. An angel appears to Joseph and confirms the fact that Mary's conception occurred through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is worth noting here that the angel's reference to Joseph as "son of David" is the only place where this designation is applied to someone other than Jesus. (Homiletics Online, December 24, 2003)

Joseph is righteous, considerate, and obedient, even at the moment of the greatest disappointment and heartache of his life. God was with him long before he met Mary, before Jesus was born, before any angelic visitation. He had learned how to be righteous, how to be considerate, how to be obedient and faithful. No wonder, then, that Mary picked out her man, Joseph, the carpenter, son of Jacob. No wonder

that God singled out Joseph for this extraordinary experience. Joseph was an extraordinary man. He was beyond average. In short, this was just the man God knew would be able to play the role in this most compelling reality experience in his lifetime. He is no Average Joe.

Mary's name is a bit more complicated. If we consider the Egyptian roots of her name, it means "beloved" or "cherished." In Hebrew, however, her name has a different meaning. The Hebrew word *miryam*, from which "Mary" comes, means "rebellion." In a sense, Mary needs both of those qualities for the work to which she is called. She is the beloved one, cherished of God, who is selected to carry and give birth to the Messiah. When the angel Gabriel first appears to her to tell her about her role in the Christmas story, he calls her "favored one."

On the other hand, that rebellious streak -- the ability to follow her inner voice when others might try to convince her to behave differently -- will come in handy throughout her pregnancy. Her courage allows her to travel to Elizabeth and Zechariah's when the angel tells her to go. It sustains her through her and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and Jesus' birth out in a stable. Most importantly, her rebellious nature gives her the ability to say yes to being used by God in this way when she knows the consequences could be dire. We need to be more like Mary, rebelliously courageous because we know we are loved by God. (Homiletics Online, 2003).

Rosa Parks was a modern-day woman who was rebelliously courageous. She never intended to start a civil rights revolution. That's not why the black seamstress refused to give up her seat to a white man. She always insisted that her feet were tired and she just didn't want to walk another step. Like Esther, Rosa Parks didn't set out to be a hero. She never thought she was doing anything special. But, even with tired feet, she must have known that her refusal to move to the back of the bus would have consequences. Her simple, but courageous, act of civil disobedience sparked the Montgomery bus boycott and captured the attention of the nation, opening eyes to the humiliation and cruelty inherent in segregation laws of the time. Rosa Parks was not your average Joe!

While Mary's pregnancy certainly did not make things easy for her and Joseph, God did take one thing off their plates. They did not have to come up with a name for their child. God gave them the perfect name for him. You might think God would give this special child a unique name. He could have been named Healer, Teacher, Miracle-Worker, Feeder of Five Thousand, One Who Walks on Water, Forgiver or something like that. Instead, he is given a name that was fairly common among first-century Jews. The angel tells Joseph, "Call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The name Jesus means "he saves" or "he will save us." As we saw with Joseph's name, "he will add," the "he" was usually thought to be God.

First-century Hebrews living under the occupation of Rome, named their children Jesus, "he saves," as a cry to God. It was a way of claiming the promise that God would come and set them free. Matthew also gives us another name for Jesus, one we sing throughout the Christmas season. He tells us that Jesus' birth fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means God with us)." This title, if not a name, is an important one for us to remember. God was with us in the person of Jesus 2,000 years ago, and God is with us in our lives today. In the midst of our joys and sorrows, we need to remember Immanuel, God is with us.

It was 1741, and an old man was wandering the streets of London. His name was George Frederick Handel. At this point, he was angry at life. His mind kept going back to the time when he was famous and had the applause of royalty and the elite of London. But now his mind was full of despair and hopelessness about the future, for the applause was gone. Others were now in the spotlight and envy began to possess him. Added to that, a cerebral hemorrhage paralyzed his right side. He could no longer write, and doctors gave little hope for recovery. The old composer traveled to France and began to soak in the baths which were said to have healing effects. The hot mineral baths seemed to help, and his health began to improve. Eventually, he was able to write once more, and his success returned.

But then he faced another reversal. Queen Caroline, who had been his staunch supporter, died. England found itself on hard economic times and heating large auditoriums for concerts was not permitted. His performances were canceled, and he began to wonder where God was.

Then one night, as he returned from his walk, Charles Jennens was waiting at his home. Jennens explained that he had just finished writing a text for a musical that covered both the Old and New Testaments and believed that Handel was the man to set it to music. Handel was indifferent as he began to read the words which Jennens had put together. But then his eyes fell on such words as ‘He was despised, rejected of men. . . he looked for someone to have pity on him, but there was no man; neither found he any to comfort him.’ His eyes raced ahead to the words: ‘He trusted in God. . . God did not leave his soul in hell. . . He will give you rest.’ And finally, his eyes stopped on the words: ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth.’ He became aware of the presence of God. He was aware in a new and profound way, and as he picked up his pen the Spirit of God was moving, and music seemed to flow through him. He finished the first part in only seven days. The second section was completed in six days.

Many will remember that when the classical work was first performed in London, and the ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ was sung by the choir, King George II was so moved that he stood to his feet. To this day, people still rise to their feet as the great chorus is sung in praise to God.

In reflecting on Handel’s Messiah, Joseph E. McCabe wrote: “Never again are we to look at the stars, as we did when we were children, and wonder how far it is to God. A being outside our world would be a spectator, looking on but taking no part in this life, where we try to be brave despite all the bafflement. A God who created, and withdrew, could be mighty, but he could not be love. Who could love a God remote, when suffering is our lot? Our God is closer than our problems, for they are out there to be faced; He is here, beside us. God with us, Emmanuel.”

Friends, one thing we can count on even in the midst of life’s’ challenges is this – Emmanuel, God with us, is indeed with us. Sometimes it can be hard to see God’s presence in our life. I too struggle with this. We have heard about an above average Joe. This morning, I believe we are surrounded by above average Joes and Josephine’s. They are part of the history of Marquis – those who built this church – but they are sitting right here in this room; behind you, in front of you; to your right and to your left. God. Is. With. Us. This Advent/Christmas Season remember to always look for Emmanuel, God’s presence in your life. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen