

Sunday December 22, 2019
 Lesson 4: Hope Fulfilled
 Scripture: Matthew 1: 18-25

Context:

Our next lesson on hope moves to the New Testament and focuses on one of the birth narratives of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew is one of the gospels known for the details given around the birth of Jesus providing names and reasons for his birth. Today we will take a close look at the phrase “God with us” that is part of Jesus’ name.

The account of Jesus’ birth in Matthew focuses more on Joseph as the primary actor instead of Mary. The Gospel of Luke goes much more in depth to explore Mary’s identity and the song of praise she sings in her role of the Savior’s birth. There are several reasons for this account of Joseph playing a major role.

Firstly, the author stresses the active component in human response through Joseph’s example. Joseph is instructed by an angel three times to do something.¹ This plays in line with Matthew understanding the Christian religion as one that is participatory where God asks for humans to respond in some manner.

The second reason for Joseph playing such a role is the tie to the ancestry of the Jewish people. Matthew includes a genealogy of Joseph. According to the records, Joseph is a descendant of David, a royal line. This was a miracle in which Joseph was to acknowledge that God was acting to bring a child into a royal family.² Joseph would have Jesus as his child, the physical father who would show him the ways of the Jewish faith.

The naming of Jesus is also important in the Gospel of Matthew. The translation of Jesus’ name comes out in Greek as “Joshua,” a common name in first century Judaism.³ The name would have been intentional as Joshua was tied to Joshua of Nun, the successor of Moses. However, the twist for Matthew is that whereas Jesus son of Nun saved Israel from their Gentile enemies, Jesus son of Joseph will save his people from their sins. Names have meanings and help us figure out our identity, as evidenced in this case.

The huge pronouncement is who Jesus will be. The phrase “God with us” comes from the Hebrew *immanu* meaning “with us,” and *El*, a short term for “God.”⁴ Jesus is given a function for his purpose on earth and the plan of salvation. He will be God with humanity and that is a huge key to the reader this is no ordinary “Joshua.” This is the Son of God who brings hope to the world.

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009), 8.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Ibid., 11.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

Application

What is in a name? A recent Advent study I was leading encouraged us to think about the power of names and how they shape us. Some of us know the history of our name. Our parents or guardians told us what sparked their interest in giving us a particular name. For some people, they liked the name after thinking of a famous celebrity or character. Others had names given because the ones who named them simply liked the name. And then there are those like mine, names given to us because it was a family name and they wanted me to carry on that legacy of the “Hunter” clan, those first ancestors to come to America before it was a country. And others of us are named for people in Bible as those who name us pray we might take on their qualities.

The name of Jesus is one that highlights someone who is in the business of saving. Yet the second name of Emmanuel takes his name to another level. “God with us” means that God is not some distant figure hiding in the clouds. “God with us” means that the Lord we worship has come down into the muck and is with humanity in all our complexity.

Have you ever thought of hope coming in the form of a name? The author of the Gospel of Matthew certainly believes that a name does bring hope and makes sure that is part of the narrative. Matthew takes the words of the prophets of old and says that this child will be the one to fulfill the prophecies to which the people clung.

During Advent, we reflect on the power of the name of Jesus, who saved not just those when he was born, but people of all time. We remember that the phrase “God with us” is one that brings hope in all seasons and to all places around the world. And we marvel that this name was at the time an ordinary one that belonged to many young boys in first century Judaism. Yet this one changed the world and gave new life to a hurting world. “God with us” meant that humanity was given a gift that would bring light into darkness. “God with us” means humanity has not and will not ever be abandoned by the God who made us.

It is also during Advent that we might take a look at ourselves and think about the names given to us. None of us are in the running to be the Son of God, but our names do give us a meaning and a purpose for this life. One of the reasons Matthew uses genealogy and includes Joseph is because there is a desire for humans to participate in God’s story. Joseph may have not been the biological father, but he was called by God by name to be the earthly father for the one who would save the world.

When I think of my name, I don’t just think of going hunting in the woodsy south Alabama where I live. I think of the ancestor who came to a new place and explored the world around him, providing a place to plant roots and carry traditions from the old to a new place. And then I think of my own call to go to new places, carrying with me my gifts and graces. I think of the act of hunting, searching for something and the thrill that comes with finding things. And then I think of how I love to think, read, and discover new things.

I think of how God has always “hunted” for me, not with thunder bolts, but with the calling to come and follow wherever I am led. And I am reminded that names have a meaning. And the phrase “God with us” tells a powerful story of God who is always with us wherever we go and in whatever age we find ourselves.

Do you know the origin of your name? Is it special to you? Has your name impacted how you live your life? How do you think Joseph felt about the call that God

was placing on his life? What excites you about the phrase “God with us?” How do you find hope in the names given to Jesus?

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