

“And Named Him Jesus” / Matthew 1:18-25 / 22 December 2013

Well, that was easy enough. Joseph goes to sleep one night with the intention of calling off the wedding with his mysteriously pregnant fiancée. But in the night, Joseph has a dream. An angel comes to him and says what angels always say in the gospels: Do not be afraid. Indeed, I am convinced that this is the one bit of advice that all these many Christmas words, and Easter words, and in-between words come down to: Do not be afraid... Go ahead, take Mary as your wife. The child's not yours, no, but you get the joyful task of raising him. And he's going to change the world. Name him “Yeshua,” which is “Jesus” in Greek and “Joshua” in English. His name will mean “God saves.”

Yes, that was easy enough. When an angel comes to you in the night and tells you what to name your kid, then one of your first and most important tasks as a parent has been taken care of. Naming is hard. I've always wished that we could give children temporary names until they turn three or even four. By then, we would know their personalities well enough to give them names that fit. As it is, the names we choose usually say more about the parents than the child. It always seemed unfair to me that I ended up going through life with the name “Brian,” which I associate more with a high school football player who ended up working in finance. Nice guy, CPA, got his degree from Carnegie Mellon. I'd love to get him to serve on session, but he's not the first person I'd put in the pulpit. Names have power, and so whether you're choosing a name for an upstart rock band that mostly plays Bruce Springsteen songs, or a newly planted church that meets at a Starbucks, or a ladies' boutique, or a newborn child, it's not easy to pick a name. Names are about identity, and identities are complex.

Some years ago Larry and Alma struggled with the question of what to name their firstborn son. The decision was made all the stickier because they were a couple with a hyphenated name. Both of them felt that it was unfair for Alma to give up her surname, so they decided to mix their two names into one. The problem was that Larry's last name was Schneeburger. As a kid, people used to make fun of him. They called him Larry Cheeseburger. Alma's last name was Billancourt, which was a French name, and stately enough...until you hyphenated it with the name Schneeburger. Their philosophy was “ladies first,” and so, when they were wed, the minister presented them as Mr. and Mrs. Billancourt-Schneeburger. It had the ring of a dubious law firm, “Billancourt-Schneeburger,” the kind that advertizes on benches at bus stops. But they say that a good compromise is when everyone walks away a little unhappy, and it worked for Larry and Alma. It took a while to sign checks and fill out forms at the doctor's office. But it worked for them...until a little newcomer was added to the mix. Larry wanted to name the child in honor of his father, Reuben. But Alma liked the now-popular name Dakota. They both wanted to honor Alma's great-grandmother, who was still living at the time, so they thought that her surname, Munro, might also make a good middle name. And so they were left with Reuben Dakota Munro Billancourt-Schneeburger. In the end, a friend stepped up with a solution. She said, “That child is going to have to go through life with whatever name you give him. How about you make it easy on the kid and just name him Brad Munro?” And that is what they did.

The friend was wise enough to see that Larry and Alma were piling too much of their own “stuff” onto an infant's young life, their own histories, and expectations, and in some way even their own egos. A child will have to live up to whatever name we choose for him or her. So, in one sense, it's nice that an angel came and made it so easy for Joseph and Mary. “You are to name him Jesus,” the angel said. “Name him Jesus, which means 'God saves', because he'll save his people; he'll save them from themselves.” Now, Jesus was a pretty common name in ancient Palestine. But isn't that a lot of pressure to place on a child's new life—to name him in the expectation that he will somehow become the rescuer of his people? Names always express the dreams and hopes that we have for our children, and this seems like an awfully lofty one to attach to Jesus. It might be easier to go through life with the name Reuben Dakota Munro Billancourt-Schneeburger than the name Jesus. What does it even mean that Jesus is somehow going to save his people from themselves?

Recently, at a convent, I saw a statue of the Holy Family that I liked. Most statues and paintings show Jesus in the middle, Mary surrounding Jesus, and awkward old Joseph looking over Mary's

shoulder a little dazedly. He's the outlier, the one no one quite knows what to do with. Most dads out there know how it feels. But this particular statue of the Holy Family was shaped almost like a Christmas tree. Joseph stood tall, and his head was the pinnacle. His flowing peasant's robe stretched out, spreading wider and wider as it reached the ground, where Mary sat cradling Jesus in the protection of her husband's vigilant form. He was no longer the third wheel on the bicycle, but a central player in the great drama of Jesus' life. The centrality of Mary is a good corrective to all the many male dominated texts that we find in Scriptures. But still, it's nice that poor old Joseph gets a few verses to himself in the Book of Matthew. When Joseph awakens from his dream, with a new name for this baby that isn't his own, he has a choice to make. He can continue with his plans to call off the wedding, or he can enter into Mary's shame, her humiliation, and let people think that the kid is his; let people think that he, too, fell from honor and jumped the marital gun, so to speak. In that time and place, it was a serious offense to be found with child prior to the wedding. People could do the math. Jesus spent his whole adult life under the then-shameful implications of having been conceived out of wedlock. By agreeing to go through with the wedding, Joseph is stepping into the shame, taking public blame upon himself despite his innocence. He's implicating himself, participating in Mary's dishonor. And this is exactly how Jesus lives up to the name given by the angel. This is precisely how Jesus "saves," by doing like Joseph and participating with us in all the unfairness, all the injustice, all the judgment, and scorn, and shame that we endure in a life of years, in a broken world.

Michelle has been watching some shows on TV that make me feel very superior. If you've ever been to our house, you know how there's a sitting room and a TV room side-by-side, and while I'm in the sitting room reading, oh, you know, commentaries on the Greek New Testament, and profound books of philosophy and theology, I can't help but overhear—and sometimes oversee—some of what Michelle is watching on TV. She thinks that I'm secretly watching the TV over her shoulder, but I'm not. In any case, she was recently watching short clips from Barbara Walters' interviews with celebrities, and it came to an interview she had done with some actor who played Spider Man. The guy said that he'd grown up very poor. As a child, he used to go to the grocery store with his mother, but when she went through the checkout line, he always ran out to the car so that he wouldn't have to be seen with her. She paid for the groceries with food stamps, and the shame was just too much for him. As an adult, he looks back on that childish shame with real grownup shame. If he had it to do over, he would stand there beside his mother. Standing with "the other" as Joseph did, as Jesus does, as you and I are called to do!

There's a big, \$10 word for this idea that God stands with us in a special way in the historic person, Jesus of Nazareth. It's called "the incarnation," the belief that God's presence somehow flooded Jesus' humanity, giving us a glimpse of what a human life filled with God looks like. We typically hear that Jesus is God in the flesh, but if that's a little too lofty for you, then think of it this way: Jesus is God's truths in the flesh. God's values of self-giving love are lived out in the human life of Jesus.

This is really what Christmas all comes down to: this belief that God enters into all the shame, and the blame, and the messiness of a beautiful and broken world. God is not far, but near. God does not remain distant in unapproachable light in some far-off heaven, but comes to us in the flesh, certainly in the person of Jesus, but then again in this person and again in that one. God participates in the very life of the world, living in and through us, taking the good parts together with the bad. And the most wondrous thing of all is that this same God calls an ordinary, simple fellow like Joseph the carpenter to take on the shame and sorrow that don't rightfully belong to him, Mary's scandalous pregnancy, and empowers that regular old Joe to stand with the outcast. "Don't be afraid, Joseph, to take Mary as your wife," though you have every right to walk away from Mary's troubles, every religious and legal right to remain unsullied by her great disgrace. Don't be afraid! Love is not ashamed! This is the call of God in Joseph's life, to join Mary and catch the blame for something that wasn't his fault. But God has a similar calling for each of us: Don't be afraid to stand in solidarity with

the loser, the outcast. Cast your lot with the misunderstood, the lonely, the mentally ill, the socially unacceptable. Advocate for the prisoner—even if he truly is guilty! Take the shame of the other on yourself, and do not be afraid. The sick, the aged, the very young, the helpless, and the hopeless, the anxious, the sad, perhaps even the least powerful of all, the animals God created but who get no vote, the world with its forests, and its plant life, and its oceans! Stand with them, for this is how God stands with humanity in Christ.

It's the weekend before Christmas, and Bobby, in Boston, gets a call from his elderly father back in Altoona. The father says, "Bobby, your mother's making me crazy. I can't take the nagging anymore. She's a slob, too. She hasn't closed a door or turned off a light since the day we got married. Ah, we were only staying together for you kids anyway, so I've finally decided to file for a divorce, and she agrees. Don't try to talk us out of it." The son gets off the phone with his dad and immediately calls his older sister in Hong Kong, waking her from a dead sleep. Within minutes, the sister—ever the elder sibling—telephones their parents in Altoona. "Dad, you and mom have been together for sixty years! How much time do you think you have left? I will not let you waste your golden years in bitter legal battles. I don't care what the issue is, we'll work it out. Don't do a thing, you hear me? I'm calling Bobby in Boston, and both of us will be there on the first flight we can catch." The daughter hangs up. The old man looks at his wife, smiles warmly, and says, "Well, dear, they'll both be home for Christmas this year."

Those of us who are no longer young but not yet old, we're the ones who don't get it. The very old and the very young alike understand the great importance of presence. What matters most is presence—not to be confused with "presents." When our ancestors gazed at the skies and pondered those weighty questions of life, back in the days when they still believed that the thunder meant God's disapproval; when our forbears were confronted with death, and birth, and illness, and wonder—yes, wonder—they found their richest comfort not in tales of conquest and glory, not in lofty wisdom or in deep proverbs, but in this simple story: a disgraced maiden, a dreaming carpenter (her fiance), an ignominious barnyard birth, God with us, God among us, God not far off where we couldn't reach, but around us and within. God not in far-off glory and power, but present in all our human travail, sharing our indignities, and outrage, and shame. God present in all our laughter, and love, and satisfaction of a job well done. God with us! This is how Jesus lives into the nearly impossible name that he received from the angel: God saves by coming to us, being among us, walking beside us...and then commissioning us to go and do likewise. There aren't very often answers to the hard questions of life. When the doctor's news is bad, when the telephone rings in the middle of the night, when someone you love is angry, or bored, or scared, and you don't know why, we have no easy answers to give. But we can do what God does in Jesus; we can do what Joseph did: we can step up and be present. There's a living presence that will not leave you or forsake you. There's a living presence that might turn up on your doorstep and offer you a casserole.

Jesus' name means "God saves." It's all about incarnation, the belief that God comes to us and walks alongside us in the person of Jesus, then calls us to do the same in the lives of others. Come to them, walk with them. Share in their blame, in their shame, in their joy, in their unexciting routines. Search your heart, in this season of Christmas. There is someone nearby whose life could be transformed by your presence. Who is it? Who in your life needs you to stand by them today? Amen.