

Advent: Fourth Sunday

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Date: 24 December 2019

Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evnas

[0:00] But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My brothers and my sisters, praise the name of Jesus this morning.

Recently I heard our dear bishop lead a devotion on the name of Jesus. There were a couple of folks who were on that call as well. And it had enough of an impact on me that it influenced this morning's sermon.

So in the Bible, as you may know, names have a way of signaling something about a person, often something fairly essential.

[1:17] And really that's not a surprising thing. I mean, when we name our own children, we think about what those names would mean, right? Elaine and I named our first child Mia.

Her name means mine, which is fitting for a sweet little girl who loves her family so much. We named our second child Lucy, which means light. She's a bright and happy little thing, and you'll probably see her bouncing around the sanctuary at some point this morning.

She brings a lot of brightness into our lives. My mom named me Caleb. That is a good and biblical name. In seminary, I had a professor, my Old Testament professor though, remind me that my name in Hebrew means dog.

My mom always pointed out that my mom, or that my name rather, has connotations of faithfulness and loyalty.

Thanks, mom. But I'm really not upset about it. I am happy to be God's dog. Today, we celebrate the promised gift that God gave us in his son, Jesus.

[2:41] Advent comes to a close. And this morning, I want us to look at that promise, and specifically to look at the names given to that promise, to that gift.

Because the names given in our readings tell us something about who he is. Let's start with the promise. We see it in Paul's introduction to the epistle to the Romans, which we read just a few minutes ago.

The apostle Paul writes this. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his son who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power, according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So we read here about that gospel of God, the son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was promised beforehand through the prophets in the Scriptures.

I think that's helpful for us to think about, because we, of course, are looking back in time when we look at the gift that God gave us in his son Jesus.

[3:59] But God promised this gift to his people long before the word became flesh, before Jesus was born. That's important to remember as we approach Christmas.

The gift that we celebrate is not God's plan B. God loves his people so much that not only was he determined to send his son to us, but he promised that he would do just that long before it ever happened.

I could do a sermon series on the prophecies in the Old Testament about the coming of Christ, but this morning I'll limit myself to the one closest at hand, our Old Testament reading for this morning from the prophet Isaiah.

We see it in that reading, and we see it repeated in our gospel reading, where we read, Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. Think about that.

[5:10] God promised the gift of his son, and the patriarchs and the prophets looked forward to that gift with great anticipation, and with great longing, and the gift that they so long for is here.

God's only son. And that's the first point for this morning, that God keeps his promises, and that he kept his promise to give us the greatest gift of all.

And that gift is not some abstract thing. That gift is a person. Going back to my introduction, in the Bible, names matter.

They tell us something essential about the person. And in this morning, morning's readings in Isaiah, and of course repeated in the gospel, and also in the gospel, we see two names attributed to the son that God the Father gave us.

We've already seen one of them. when we looked at the promise that the virgin will conceive and bear a son and call his name Emmanuel. Emmanuel, that name clearly was in mind when Joseph and Mary named Jesus.

[6:39] Spoiler alert, that is the other name we're going to talk about this morning. We of course shouldn't apply the name Emmanuel too literally, as if Emmanuel was Jesus' middle name, but it's a name that tells us something about who he is, and it's important.

Emmanuel, what does the name mean? What does it mean when the scripture is called Jesus Emmanuel, and why does it matter to us? Emmanuel means God with us.

That should tell us that the gift of Jesus is a gift to celebrate. It's a reminder that God the Son took on our humanity, and that means that we are not alone.

If Jesus is God with us, and he is, that changes absolutely everything. It makes all of the difference in the world.

Again, it means that as believers, we are never alone. Jesus is present with us. God did not leave us to sort out our messes by ourselves, which is a good thing because when we do that, we generally make bigger messes.

[8:07] No. He sent his only Son to be Emmanuel, to be God with us, to give us his presence.

We are not on our own. God cares, and he gave us definitive proof when he gave his Son to take on flesh. Emmanuel, God with us, also means that we don't have to guess about what God is like. If God is with us in the person of his Son and he is, then we know what God is like. What do we see when we look at Jesus? Because he walked the earth, and we have the record of what he said and did, so we know.

When we look at Jesus, what do we see? We see love, we see holiness, we see perfect goodness, we see compassion. if we want to know what God is like, we have God with us to show us.

God is not some remote figure somewhere out there. He's with us. So, if Jesus is God with us, it means not only that we're not alone and that we know what God is like, also means that our God knows how to sympathize with us.

[9:40] He knows what we're going through, especially the hard stuff. We tend to be reminded of the hard stuff as the holidays approach, don't we? But think about the life that Jesus lived.

He knew suffering, he knew sorrow, he knew betrayal, he knew pain, he knew loss, and he knew death.

That pretty well covers the hard things that we'll deal with in our own lives, doesn't it? As human beings, when we suffer, it's a common reflex for us to think or to say, where was God when this or that painful thing happened to me?

But if God is with us, then we have our answer, don't we? He is with us in the midst of our darkest moments, even in the valley of the shadow of death, and he knows what we're going through.

He suffered as we suffer, he knew the temptation that we knew, that we know still, but he never sinned, of course.

[11:02] But as believers, we have the assurance that no matter what happens, he is with us and he cares. God with us.

That makes all of the difference in the trials and tribulations and the uncertainties of this life, and there are many. What a gift that is.

Well, you already know the next name that we're going to talk about this morning because I already gave it away. The name of Jesus. What does the angel say to Joseph in our gospel text for this morning?

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. So we might ask, what is the connection between the name of Jesus and him saving his people from their sins?

Because it seems like there's a connection there. Well, what does the name Jesus mean? Well, we could get really technical in translation here, but I'm not going to do that.

[12:16] Basically, the name of Jesus means this, God saves. Jesus lives up to his name.

He saves his people from their sins. And it's a good thing because we would be in a real bind if he didn't do that. Wouldn't we?

Looking honestly at our own hearts isn't proof enough. Take a look at the Old Testament. What Israel endured as they waited for a savior.

Here's the Cliff Notes version. God gives his law to Israel. Guess what? They don't keep it. They receive a sacrificial system, but it can't put away sins as the blood of bulls and goats can't.

We look at the period of the judges. The text of Scripture says about that time period that everyone did what was right in their own eyes. Sounds like another period of time I'm personally acquainted with, but let's move on.

[13:34] Israel asked for a king. They get a king. Most kings in the series of kings do wicked things and ultimately fall into idolatry. The kingdom splits. The people continue in sin until they fall to conquest and exile.

Israel will be I'm not trying to be too hard on Old Testament Israel. I don't think that I would have done any better in their place.

The whole story demonstrates that if God does not save his people from their sins, then we're not going to be saved from our sins. Because for God to save us from our sins, it took nothing less than God taking on flesh, him keeping God's law perfectly on our behalf, him paying our debt, and paying the penalty for our sins by his death on the cross, and him rising from the dead to give us victory over the grave.

notice something. We didn't contribute anything to any of that, did we?

Other than providing the sin that made it necessary. God saves, and we receive it freely by faith as a totally undeserved gift.

[15:05] What a gift it is. God saves. God saves. And he saves all who call on the name of Jesus.

Not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done. God is with us, and God saves. That's what this morning's readings tell us about the promised gift that God has given us in his son.

God has done. So you might be wondering, as we've had an Advent sermon theme of stewardship, how that ties in to all of this.

I want to close with us thinking about how we should respond to the gift that we've been given.

Thank you. the Anglican poet, Christina Rossetti, wrote the poem that became the Christmas hymn in the bleak midwinter.

I'm assuming you know it. The hymn closes with how we might respond to the gift of Jesus. Jesus.

It says, what can I give him, poor as I am?

[16:27] If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what I can, I give him, give my heart.

heart. So, let's be clear. God does not have to have our services.

It's not like we can supply him with something that is lacking or that wasn't already his. But the proper response to receiving the gift that he has given is to give our hearts.

To offer our whole selves, all that we are and all that we have, to his service. And that is for our benefit, not his, because in an offering ourselves to Jesus, we find true joy and true freedom.

As Advent closes, let's approach Christmas with an attitude of offering our whole selves, every aspect of our lives to bring stewardship back into it, including what we do with what we've been given.

[17:52] Let's approach Christmas with an attitude of offering our whole selves and every aspect of our lives to Jesus. Let's give our hearts, which again involves our entire selves, over to Jesus.

That is the only fitting response to the great gift that we have been given in Emmanuel, God with us, Jesus, the one who saves God's people.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.