

## The Name of Jesus

2 January 2011

Fred Hedt, Pastor

Ascension Lutheran Church

Landover Hills, Maryland

## “What’s In A Name?”

Acts 4.11-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

A man stands up in court. He’s been charged with a crime that has gotten many people like him lynched. He stands before a court that is hostile. They demand that he explain his actions. Prudence dictates that he measures his words very, very carefully. In fact, the smart thing to do would be to throw himself on the mercy of the court, promise to never commit this offense again, and beg for forgiveness. A packed courtroom strains to hear what he might say. The transcript reads: “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit said, ‘Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders – He has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved’.”

That is recorded in Acts 4.11-12 and is our text.

***Jesus – there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved.***

**What’s in a name?** Many cultures give children names that mean something. Ubong Abassi’s name means “the glory of God”, and Omalayo Ojurungbe’s name means “joy”.

Americans tend not to do that. I’d like to think that my parents decided I was a “Prince of Peace” and a “gift from God” – which is what “Frederick” and “Theodore” mean – and that that’s how I got my name. But being “Frederick Theodore the third”, I know I was named for my father and grandfather.

In fact, rather than giving names that have some meaning Americans have gone the complete opposite direction, inventing brand new names that are melodic and beautiful but are just made up and have no real meaning: “LaKeisha”.

Names in the Bible not only had meaning, they were often descriptive. More like what we do with “nicknames”. The nicknames we give people are often descriptive – “Slim”: he probably either weighs 80 pounds or 480 pounds.

A baby is born with a ruddy, red complexion and is named “Red”. In Hebrew that is “Edom”, who we know better as “Esau”. His twin brother is born hanging on to “Red’s” heel, so he’s given the name “Heel”, or “Jacob” in Hebrew.

Hannah prayed year after year after year for a child. And when – finally – a child was born she named him “Samuel” which means “God heard me”.

When Abraham was 99 years old God told him that his wife Sarah who was 89 years old was going to have a baby. And Abraham laughed in God’s face. And then God told Sarah that she was going to have a baby, and Sarah laughed in God’s face. And then Sarah had a baby! And God told them to name the baby “Isaac” which means “he laughs”. Years later just picture dinner time when Isaac is out playing and Sarah calls her son to come in. She stands at the door and yells “He laughs, he laughs”... I think it was God’s way of getting the last laugh.

An angel tells Joseph that his fiancé is pregnant with God's son, and that Joseph is to name that child "Jesus". "Jesus" means "God saves." **"You shall name him 'Jesus', for he will save his people from their sins."**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> day when Jewish boys were named, the child was taken to the Temple and given the name "Jesus" = "God saves". If we celebrate the birth of that child on December 25, then January 1 is the 8<sup>th</sup> day, the day the name "Jesus" was given.

Today is the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. And while the appropriate gift for this day may be "9 Ladies Dancing", we celebrate today the even greater gift.

The gift of that name which is above all names.

The gift of that name which is the only name by which we can be saved.

That day in court St. Peter declared "there is salvation in no one else". In the age of pluralism that is awfully un-PC. Aren't there many paths to God? Isn't there wisdom to be found in all the great religions of the world???

Peter's declaration is rooted in the reality of the human condition. We are separated from God. The Bible calls that condition "Sin". "Sin" with a capital "S", not to be confused with "sins" with a little "s", the thoughts, words, and deeds of which we are not proud and displease God and widen the gulf between us.

"sins" are even somewhat manageable. I have, so far, controlled my impulse to rob banks. I was able to quit smoking – but it took 13 years of failed attempts. Other sins are so ingrained, so habitual that I go back to them again and again like the moth to a flame. But even if I could get those under control, it would not bridge the gap between me and God.

I was born separated from God. No amount of self-discipline, no amount of New Years resolutions, no amount of therapy or education or training is going to bridge that gap. No matter how hard I would try, on my own I would remain separated from God, who is the author and source of Life itself.

We humans beings are capable of great accomplishments: works of great beauty, art and literature and music and dance. We erect great buildings and build ingenious devices – I can't keep up with latest innovation on the internet. As wonderful and creative as it is, it does not bridge our gap from God.

The great religions of our world document humanities quest for God. And there is much in them that is true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent and praise worthy. There is much for us to study and learn. But they tell the story our quest for God and like any human effort, cannot bridge the gap between us and God.

In Philippians 3 St. Paul documents his sincere and considerable efforts to close the gap between himself and God. As a pharisaic Jew he had the right pedigree and put more time and effort into keeping all the rules than any one else. But when he took a step back and looked at all of his efforts to raise himself up to God – all of the true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent and praise worthy things he did – he says if you piled them all up, it amounted to one heap of garbage in terms of getting him back to God.

We cannot do it.

We cannot bridge the gap between us and God.

We can try to manage "sins", but we cannot defeat "Sin".

In love, in mercy, God did what we could not do. God bridged the gap between us and him. God closed the distance that separated us and him. And he did it by pouring Himself into human flesh in a baby who on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas was given the name “God Saves”.

There is no other name by which we can be saved because Jesus is unique: Immanuel, God with us, God come to us to bridge the gap.

If the great religions of the world document humanities quest for God, Jesus is the story of God’s quest for humanity. Jesus is the story of God coming from above, taking on our dust, bearing our sin, absorbing all that is worst in us, that we might be born again, born a 2<sup>nd</sup> time, born from above. Jesus – God and man – was uniquely positioned to be the bridge - us & God.

In the Walter’s art museum in Baltimore there is a statue of a baby that I have seen in several trips through that gallery. It was not until taking some teenagers there this weekend that I really stopped to look at it. The baby is very young, just old enough to sit up on its own. It’s been placed on a blanket to occupy himself by playing with some toys. It is a familiar, homey scene, and one can pass by rather quickly, as I had already done several times. This time we paused to look – and one is struck by the “toys” *this* baby plays with. A crown of thorns. A scourge. Spikes that have been bent when they struck bone. And the baby blanket is no blanket at all – it is a burial shroud.

**“You shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”**