

Leading up to the birth of our first child, my wife and I spent quite a bit of time with <<this>> book. It is called, "A World of Baby Names." In it there are over 30,000 different names from around the world – each is listed along with its variations and, most importantly, its meaning.

My parents gave me my first name, John, for its biblical connections. John the Baptist, the Gospel of John, etc. John means, "God is gracious." My middle name, David, is important in my mother's family, as David is the name of my mom's favorite uncle, my grandma's brother. David also means "beloved," which is sweet.

Names are powerful things. Each one has a meaning, a history. Do you know what your name means? Perhaps it is a family name. Perhaps it is a Biblical name. Perhaps it holds some other special meaning for you. Actually, take a minute and turn to someone sitting next to you and share with them where your name comes from.

Stories are filled with wonderful names. One of the reasons I loved reading the Harry Potter series was the whimsical names of the characters. Albus Dumbledore, Luna Lovegood, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, and the list goes on. Each one captures the feeling of the kind of character they are. But there are surprises. The mean teacher, who seems an enemy to Harry Potter, is named Severus Snape – really a wicked sounding name. But, in the end, Severus Snape ends up a hero, a person who sacrifices greatly of himself for good.

When I was growing up, my Dad would tell my sister and I stories of a girl named "Mathilda." She lived in a cottage near the forest and had lots of animal friends that she talked to. So I was a little shocked when I learned in this book that the name "Mathilda" actually literally means, "power in battle." A strong name, but its meaning doesn't match the picture of a Mathilda I had in my head. Names are powerful. They are filled with meaning and history, and sometimes they surprise us.

So when an unwed, low-income teenage girl named Mary, some two-thousand years ago, heard from an angel that she would bear a child and name him "Jesus," I wonder how she felt about that.

"Do not be afraid," the angel had said to Mary some nine months before Jesus' birth. "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great...and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary, I'm sure, was *more* than a little surprised by this choice of name. Jesus. Because Mary, she would have known that the name Jesus is a name that literally means, "he saves."

God saves.

Mary didn't need a book of 30,000 baby names. She and Joseph did not need to make lists of favorite names and then narrow it down to their favorite one. No. "You will name him Jesus," the angel had said.

Mary remembered this moment those many months later, on that Christmas night, while she was surrounded by shepherds and barn animals – with nothing more to lay her child in than a feeding trough for donkeys and cows. "His name will be Jesus," she thought.

I wonder, as Mary looked down at her newborn son, I wonder if she doubted this powerful name. In that moment, the powerful name he had been given – Jesus – did not exactly match what she was seeing.

Because here was God's own salvation, swaddled and crying in the poorest of circumstances. The child of two homeless, unmarried travelers. This powerful name – Jesus – is given to one with the least social power imaginable. Born among the poor, without shelter, to a family nobody knew and no inn keeper would house.

And then, this savior, God who became flesh and blood and bone with us, he would die on a cross. In the story of Jesus, salvation does not come through great acts of flashy power and might, but through God giving of his own self, of entering into human pain and fragility and life and death.

After this child Jesus is born, the gospel of Luke tells us that his young mother "wrapped him in cloth strips and placed him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." At the very end of the gospel, after his death, Luke writes practically the same words again, that Jesus' body was "wrapped in linen cloth and placed in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had yet been laid."

Here is why all of this matters for us, church. We – you and I – we call ourselves the body of Christ. In our baptisms, we are claimed as children of God, and we bear within ourselves the name of Jesus. If we are to participate in the saving life and love of Jesus, might we also need to do it from a place of powerlessness? Humility? This babe born in Bethlehem teaches us to give ourselves away, to follow in the way of love to our own death, to love even our enemies. This is how God saves. This is what the kingdom looks like that will have no end.

Here is how the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians. He tells this congregation to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

And what is the mind of Jesus? Well, Paul writes that it is one that humbles itself, that does not seek power (even though he could have), that gives itself away. "Therefore,

God gave Jesus the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every name should bend, in heaven and on earth."

As we embark on a New Year, this is a popular time to make resolutions. It is a time to recommit ourselves to the call of love, of discipleship, of forgiveness. So, I wonder...

As people who bear the name of Jesus – God saves – how might we dare to be the loving, self-giving people that Jesus has called us to be? What does it look like to be flesh and blood and bone in a world that longs for healing and salvation? We are not called to act with power, but with the same mind that was in Jesus...with the same tenderness and vulnerability and openness as Mary witnessed on that first Christmas night when she gazed into the precious eyes of her son, her Savior.

Yes, my friends the name of Jesus is a powerful name. And each of your names is powerful too, precisely because God has chosen in Jesus to come to this world to save every one of you. Yours is a name that God knows intimately. May we all venture forth in this coming year equipped with the knowledge and assurance of our salvation, unafraid to bear this salvation to all the world.

Ours is a calling of courage and vision and compassion and hope. But, most of all, it is one of love. A love that gives itself away. A love that recognizes the promise of God's own salvation among the poor, the powerless, the least of these. A love that asks for forgiveness when we sin, and offers forgiveness freely.

May we be of one mind and one heart, remembering always that God's salvation has come for us, and its name is Jesus, the Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

Good Christmas?

What year is it?

New Year's resolutions

What's a resolution?

We resolve to do things differently or better in the New Year.

At Christmas, God makes a resolution to us. That no matter what we do or how this next year goes, God will be with us! God has resolved to love us. And that's the important resolution.