

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
December 23, 2007

“Name Him Jesus”
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

One Christmas my mother made everyone in her family a cross-stitch wall hanging of their name. The meaning of each name was part of the wording. Here, I'll show you: [Pastor Karen showed the framed hangings].

When my daughter Grace was born a number of years later, my mother gave us the framed picture she had made for her mother, my grandmother, my daughter's namesake. My mother wrote these words on the back: (read)

Our names are important to us, aren't they? Do you like your name? How did your parents choose your name -- how did you choose your children's names? I remember selecting my first child's name during a trip from Nashville to our parents' homes in Ohio the spring before the baby was born. It took a whole ride up to pick a boy's name, and the whole ride back home to pick a girl's name. Andrew was chosen because we both really liked the name, and Mitchell was chosen as a middle name in memory of Bill's close high school friend who had been killed in a motorcycle accident on his 21st birthday. Soon after Andrew was born, I had in my mind selected Alexander as a name if I ever had another son, which I did, -- and it seemed just perfect when that baby boy was born with red hair. Though Alex will tell you that in every church we've been part of there are people who call him Eric, and even address birthday cards to him as Eric. I remember a conversation he had with an 80+ year old lady in Streetsboro.

She introduced him to a church visitor as Eric -- he corrected her politely, she apologized but said whenever she saw him she just automatically thought of "Eric the Red." Alex quickly offered this comeback, "Well, instead of Eric the Red why don't you just think of "Alexander the Great." She burst out laughing, and those two were fast friends ever since. Grace was named for my maternal grandmother, who died the year before she was born. We had fun with her birth announcements -- in block letters on the front of the card it said "It's Amazing" -- and then on the inside it said, "It's Grace!" We took the naming of our three children seriously, and to this day I am still glad for the names we gave them.

Sometimes people's names fit them, but sometimes they don't. Sometimes you wonder about a person when you hear their name. I had a seminary classmate named Cliff Edge. I have wondered about how his life has turned out. He always seemed kind of nervous and unsure of himself. No wonder. Do you think he's lived his whole life afraid of falling over the edge of a cliff? Another seminary classmate was named Pinkney Love. I'm serious. To me he didn't look the part at of a man who signed his name Pink Love. He was pasty white, extra large, bald, and always seemed kind of nerdy to me. But to my amusement and amazement he was quite the ladies' man. Maybe being named Pink Love has its advantages after all!

"An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'"

“Name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Jesus is named Jesus because of what God has sent Jesus to do. His name and his life are connected. Jesus did not just become the Savior at the end of his life --on the cross, at the tomb in the garden. No, from the time of Jesus’ birth, God was at work to bring salvation to the people of the world.

The name “Jesus” means “God helps,” and it’s the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yeshua, which in English is Joshua. The name appears almost 600 times in the 4 gospels of the New Testament. It was, back then, a common name, an ordinary name, a familiar name. There were, we know, at least 5 high priests known as Jesus. The first century historian Josephus personally knew of 20 different people named Jesus. Paul had a friend named Jesus Justus. Someone else in the New Testament is called Bar-Jesus. It was, therefore, a name others used, a name other parents gave their children. But Jesus was named Jesus because of what he would do. The one named “Yahweh helps” or “Yahweh saves” was indeed sent by Yahweh, sent by God, to save people from their sins. Jesus is a Savior. Jesus is the One who helps.

And this saving stuff is a year-round reality, friends. Not just a Christmas gift. Jesus is Savior everyday. From Christmas to Easter to summer to Thanksgiving and back to Christmas again. The birth of Jesus, the naming of Jesus, has significance year-round, as well as year in and year out. Who Jesus is and what Jesus does makes a difference long after we’ve put away all the Christmas decorations, and unwrapped all

our Christmas presents. Jesus is our Savior, and Jesus brings God's salvation to the people of the world all year long.

There was a Peanuts comic strip I've remembered that featured a conversation between Charlie Brown and Lucy. Charlie Brown asked, "Why does it have to be that people are willing to set their differences aside and be kind to each other just at Christmas time? Why can't it be that way all year round?" Lucy responds, "What are you, some kind of religious fanatic or something?"

Matthew was. Jesus was, too. Matthew believed that the Christmas event has meaning throughout the entire year. Jesus saves all the time. Not just on holidays. How about you and me? Are we year-round believers? Do we remember the good news of Christmas when we're stuck in the blahs of late January, early February, or how about in the long stretch of hot summers? Are we year-round shepherds sharing the good news with others?

Jesus saves us from our sins. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. God did not declare salvation to us from a distance, saving us while remaining in heaven. No, God chose to enter the world to get up close and personal with us, and with all in need of salvation. God is near at hand. In Jesus God comes to us. In Jesus our sins are forgiven. In Jesus we know God's amazing and merciful love. After the twelve days of Christmas are over. After all the lovely carols of the season have been sung. After everything else has returned to normal – Jesus still saves. Jesus is still God with us.

So the imperatives we have listened to these 4 Sundays of Advent are not just words of advice to get us ready for Christmas. They are meant to be followed year round by all who believe. Here they are – hear them again:

Keep awake.

Abound in hope.

Fear not.

Name him Jesus.

May the spirit and joy of Christmas be with you always. Amen.