

The Name of Jesus

JESUS IS NAMED...SO WE CAN BE TOO

Luke 2:15-21

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

Luke 2:15: When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16: So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17: When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18: and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19: But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20: The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. 21: After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Note: In writing this crossing, I have in mind the importance of names. In the ancient Near East, "great significance was attached to personal names, as they revealed character and identity and signified existence...They served as an important symbol, an element of creative activity. To know the name of a person or thing is to know its essential nature and to have power over it" (Harper's Bible Dictionary). For example, Adam was given the authority to name the animals, thus giving humans "dominion" over the rest of creation. (Psalm 8, the psalm for this day, echoes this theme.) Names that "reveal essential nature" I think of as job descriptions (such as Smith, Baker,

Tailor). Jesus' name means "Yahweh saves." The angel explicitly explains that Jesus is given this name because "he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21).

The other readings for this day are very helpful, I encourage readers to reference them. The Old Testament reading, Numbers 6:22-27, illustrates God's possessing (and therefore blessing) the people of Israel by putting his name on them. There is a choice for epistle lessons, both are good. Gal 4:4-7 describes how Jesus turns slaves into children of God, a re-naming. Phil 2:5-13 stresses that God is the namer of Jesus, a name which, on account of what he did, now commands cosmic homage.

DIAGNOSIS: The Power of Names

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Name Dropping for Status

Eight days after his birth Jesus is circumcised, receiving the Jewish ritual that signified God's covenant with the people of Israel, and he is named (v. 21). These two rituals go together, they are Jesus' initiation into the Jewish covenant community. He now "belongs" in it. Our names are important too, they give us a sense of belonging, whether that name is acquired at birth or assumed at marriage. Sometimes we are tempted to use our "good names" for our own personal advantage, such as when we name drop, or throw our names around. Other times, our names are associated with titles we definitely do not like, names like "debtor" or "unemployed" or "addict."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Trusting Our Names

During his ministry, Jesus was constantly confronting people regarding the true "powers" that possessed and named them. Because these powers rejected him, Jesus suggested that they did

NOT belong to the same Power he did. Instead, they had put their trust in, had become “slaves” to, alternate, alien “powers.” For the scribes and Pharisees, the greatest temptation was to trust the power of the Law that enabled them to justify themselves. Their name-dropping centered on their ancestry and their own goodness. There are other powers too which, although we do not choose them, wrap their tight stranglehold around us and control our lives. For example, we all are affected by the power called globalization, some even to the point of losing our jobs. Another alien power that grips many is addiction. When we respond to these powers with despair and/or fear, then it is clear that these powers control, or name us. Paul put it this way: “While we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world” (Gal 4:3).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Nameless: Lost*

Worse than being enslaved and manipulated by alien powers is that, by being named by them, we end up belonging to them. But that makes us nameless, unknown, to the one ultimate Power who controls life and death. The final verdict: “I do not know where you come from; go away from me” (Luke 13:27). For Luke, to be nameless, unrecognized by God, is the same as being lost.

PROGNOSIS: The Power of “The Name”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus, “Savior,” Saves the Lost*

Luke takes special note of the fact that the Jesus’ name is given by Yahweh’s messenger angel (v. 21). Thus we know that Yahweh is the “power” behind Jesus’ name, a name that means “Yahweh saves.” Luke tells us that Jesus came exactly “to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The way he accomplishes this salvific feat is horrible to behold: he “took the form of a slave” (Phil 2:7), became a nameless one himself, unrecognized and lost to God. Paul says, he “became obedient to the point of

death-even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). This willing sacrificial exchange is what makes his name holy, the reason God exalts him, causing every knee in heaven and on earth to bow (Phil 2:8). Yahweh doesn't leave Jesus dead (eternally lost). He snatches him back to life and exalts Him, making Him Lord of the universe.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Named into Jesus ("Christ"-ened)*

Through Jesus' vindication, Yahweh declares that every lost, nameless one who trusts Jesus will be treated like him. And so we gladly are "named" into Christ, "christ"-ened at our baptisms with his Holy Name, thus signifying that we belong to him. Notice the cosmic take-over that has occurred here. The old powers have lost their power to control us, we are named by, claimed by, the Power that named Jesus, we become his "adopted children" (Gal. 4:5). Even as we wrangle with alien, threatening powers, joy and peace replace fear and anxiety because we know our "names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Name Dropping "The Name" for Salvation*

Just like Jesus, our "Christian" names become our job description as well. We become "little Christs" to our families, our neighbors, our world, seeking out the lost, that is, those in the stranglehold of alien powers, in order that they too might enjoy Yahweh's ownership (salvation). Our motivation is not the inheritance promised, rather it is an adoption-induced concern for enslaved people. We can't help but "name drop," but this time the name we drop is not our own. Rather, it's that name the angel told Mary to name her baby: we announce the holy name of Jesus.