

The Born Identity
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 2:1-20

This is my 35th trip to Bethlehem in this unnerving, pressurized vehicle called a pulpit. This is the 2009 model, but I've also clicked off a load of Bethlehem miles in a simple, unadorned 19th Century model, a mid-century modern model, a grand, traditional 1965 model laden with intricate oaken overlay carved by a German master craftsman, and a rudimentary, manufactured, high-mileage, hand-me-down used model that served this congregation well for nearly two decades. 35 trips to Bethlehem. One would think I'd know the way by now, but the tricky conundrum about Bethlehem is that you have to find a different route every year lest your road become rutted and leave you stranded in the wilderness.

And yet, in 35 trips to the city of David, I don't think I noticed until this year that in the traditional text from Luke read across the globe on Christmas Eve, the name of Mary's child is not mentioned or uttered. The angel Gabriel gives Mary the naming memo from the home office in Chapter 1, but from our reading this evening in Chapter 2, the shepherds, the innkeeper, the animals in the birthing barn, and maybe

even Joseph are left in naming rights darkness. In a movie based solely on this text in Luke, the actor in the title role could only be named in the credits as: *infant in feeding trough*.

It is Jewish tradition that a newborn boy is not named, at least publicly until the briss, the circumcision and naming ceremony held on the infant's eighth day. One reason given for this is that it allows the parents to sidestep meddling relatives. Good luck with that, when we told my father our choices for our first child, Noah if it's a boy, Hannah if it's a girl, he sniffed, "Let's pray it's a girl." Sorry grandpa. Perhaps waiting until the briss is practical. Meddling relatives might hesitate to make a fuss when the mohel is wielding a knife.

In any case, the name Jesus doesn't come up in Luke's nativity. I have read, parsed, preached, taught, and tangled with this text for well over half of my life, and I don't know that I caught that until this week. The child became known as the light that shines in the darkness, but evidently, when the light passed by me, it was missing a bit of *E* in its *LED*. So, Luke leaves open the question of whether Mary shared the news of Gabriel's instructions with anyone before the briss. Did Joseph know? And what about the shepherds? Luke says they left the manger

scene glorifying God and praising God for all they had heard and seen, but after the last verse of *Joy to the World* was a shepherd heard inquiring, "Hey, did anyone to think to ask about the kid's name?" Come to think about it, the name doesn't show up in *Joy to the World*, either.

We, the readers of the Gospel, know the newborn's name is Jesus. We're looking over Luke's shoulder as he reports the angel's visit to Mary, "you will ... bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." We travel with Luke to the circumcision where in a small family ceremony, the name of Jesus is connected to the infant who is still vocally miffed by that whole thing with the knife and thinking, "There had better be some ice cream after this!"

We're there with Luke in Jerusalem, hearing the frenzied and frightened parents shouting Jesus' name until their voices are hoarse and they locate their lost child right where they left him in the temple. We're there when the unclean spirit seethes, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth!" We're there when Jesus introduces himself as he recruits disciples. We're there when the Pharisees complain to Jesus about breaking Sabbath rules. We're there when Jesus mediates Mary and Martha's sibling rivalry, when he is named marshal of the first

Palm Sunday parade, and when he gathers with his disciples in an upper room, sharing bread and cup, body and blood. We're there when Jesus prays in the garden, is dragged before Pilate, hung on a cross, and when he surprises grieving travelers on the way to Emmaus.

We know Jesus, baby in the manger, carpenter in Nazareth, barefoot skier in Galilee, arisen from the tomb, right? We know the name Jesus, but there in Bethlehem, did the shepherds know? Did those passing by, drawn near like anyone who sees a new baby, gob smacked by the shepherd's report; did they catch the infant's name? Or, was Jesus' name one of those things Mary held close to herself as she pondered the shepherd's tale?

An unanswered question that strikes me in this text is whether the shepherds would follow the story of this infant as he grew. What impact would this evening's encounters have on their lives? Did reports of Jesus' miraculous signs in Galilee make it into their copies of Shepherd's Monthly? Did they have access to notes from his teaching engagements? Were they in the crowd on Palm Sunday? Were their voices among those calling for his crucifixion later that week? Did they weep at the sight of the cross? Would they hear rumors of his

resurrection? Even if they did learn his name at the manger, would they know or understand the arc of his life and the revelation of his character?

We know Jesus' name, but do we understand what lies behind the name? We have access to the narrative that relates his words and deeds, but do we know what they reveal about the character of God? What do we learn from the arc of Jesus' life that discloses the exorbitance of God's grace and maybe even the reason Gabriel was so specific about the name? (The Greek $\eta\sigma\upsilon\varsigma$ and the Hebrew *Yeshua* or *Joshua* both mean *God saves*.) And isn't that what is revealed through his life even without the name?

Before Jim Nance and Tony Romo were bringing you the play-by-play and on the spot analysis from the NFL, it was a former kicker, Pat Summerall and Hall of Fame Coach John Madden (yes, he's more than a video game). When Pat Summerall died, it was Madden who spoke at the funeral. He said to those gathered that one criterion for greatness is, "Can the history of what you did be written without mentioning your name?" He then ran through the list of histories that cannot possibly be written without mentioning his friend, Pat -- the history of college

football, the NFL, the NFL on television, all the shows that he teed up during his broadcasts, *60 Minutes; Murder, She Wrote; The Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. (Ryan Hockensmith, espn.com)

Even apart from Theology, Christology, Soteriology, Atonement, and Election, just imagine all that would not have taken place had the birth in Bethlehem never come to pass? How many stories of redemption and hope would have remained laments of lost potential? How many people would have never found the ballast of moral sensibility? How many would have uttered those words that would if not for the brakes applied by the life witness of Jesus in the Gospels? Where would we be without the saints of the church whose dedication to serving Jesus would feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, work for peace, and offer consolation to a hurting world? Imagine a world without the witness of Francis of Assisi, Jane Addams, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Teresa of Calcutta, all of whom looked to the life witness of the One named Jesus for inspiration, example, purpose, strength, and motivation.

Yet, we cannot and should not evade the reality that through the ages, there have also been far too many claiming the name of Jesus but

acting in ways that have hurt, defrauded, deformed, and destroyed those Jesus loves. We must recognize and own that while it is one thing to claim the name of Jesus, it is something more to reflect the character of Jesus, and both individually and corporately, we have regularly and disastrously fallen short.

Yet, wherever there is compassion, wherever there is mercy, wherever there is grace, the degrees of separation from the name and person of Jesus are few. Jesus, for all time, embodies to the fullest extent, all of that which Isaiah foretold: For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given ... And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. All of it ... all of it ... embodied in an infant with a name: Jesus.

I am often asked if the church has a mission statement - *Do you have a mission statement? My company has a mission statement; my mentor has a mission statement; my kid's soccer team has a mission statement.* My word, down here in the village of Type A, I think even the dogs have mission statements. I'm just not that creative! When they passed out mission statement credentials along with enthusiasm pills in my college marketing courses, I ... may have skipped class; maybe I was

busy protesting powdered eggs at the dorm cafeteria. I don't know. But when I'm asked to share the church's mission statement ... after a little awkward squirming and stuttering ... I'll usually say ... "Um ... Jesus?"

I mean, who do I know is always going to love God more than me? Jesus. Who can I look to for the absolute best model for loving my neighbor? Jesus. Whose life is going to finally reveal to me that love is not building walls but tearing them down; that my life is of no more worth and no less worth to God than anyone; that my Jewish college roommate, my Islamic friends are treasured in God's sight? Jesus. Who, more than Jesus is looking for the day when a person is no more judged by the color of one's skin or category of one's gender, but by the content of one's character?

Jesus. It's a name. It's an identity. It's a mission statement. It ... is ... love. And on this night, love is born. Amen.