

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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January 1, 2006
New Year's Day
Luke 2:21
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 8
Second Lesson: Philippians 2:9-13
Gospel: Luke 2:21

What's in a Name?

If the Lord has blessed you with a child, do you remember how you came up with the name for the child? Did you have it picked out ahead of time or did you wait until you looked at that little ball of skin and say, "That looks like a Fred. That looks like a Tony. That looks like a Susan"? Or did you pick it out ahead of time because you kind of liked the ring of how the name and the middle name went together? Or was it to name them after a parent or a grandparent or a good friend? Do you ever think about how you came up with those names? I'm sure at one time you must have given it some thought. I don't think you would have just closed your eyes and pointed a finger in a baby name book and came up with it. What is in a name?

What's in the name that we are looking at this morning, the name of "Jesus", probably goes much deeper than anything else that we ever came up with. I am pretty sure, I am positive that none of the names that I came up with or that we came up with for our children were the fulfillment of promises some centuries millennia earlier. Yet the name "Jesus", a common name at the time it was given, was the fulfillment of promises. Even more than that, what is in the name "Jesus" as we see today, on the day that we mark his circumcision, the 8th day after his birth, we see that the name "Jesus" is the fulfillment of the Law. That becomes important when we become honest with ourselves and look at our own hearts and we see just how desperately we need someone that is going to fulfill the Law in our place.

So on this day that we mark the observance of the name of Jesus, we see what is in this name "Jesus"—the fulfillment of the Law and the fulfillment of God's promises.

I would guess that some of you are pretty excited now sitting here this morning, aren't you? We only have one verse to preach on. It can't take us that long. Is that thought going through your head? This one verse says an awful lot to us. It tells us of what Jesus did on the 8th day when he was still there in his home, passively, just laying there. He did something for us that placed himself under the Law in our place. He was circumcised. Just the removal of flesh from the body, but circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God had made with Abraham. And he said, "When you are circumcised, that will mark you as being under this covenant and being a part of my people". He also said, "If you wander from the covenant"—the covenant was also to honor God and to serve God and to love him with all their heart—"when you wander away from it, your circumcision will be no good if you turn your back on me, if you ignore me and you chase after your own ways."

But God also then made circumcision a part of his Law in Leviticus. He said, “This you have to do. This is a part of the way you will honor me and you will serve me.” So Jesus, as this 8-year-old God-man who came into the world, wherever they were in Bethlehem, was circumcised. And he was given the name “Jesus”. Through his circumcision, he carries out what he came to do—which was to be under the Law in our place.

It might not seem like a whole lot to us, but when you think about just how desperately we need him to be under the Law in our place, it becomes something for us to sit back and marvel at—the love our God has for us. Think about why we need Jesus to be under the Law in our place. We need it because we are sinners. Not only are we born in sin, but we give rise to sin in every thought, word and deed until our God makes us his own by giving us the gift of faith. Then, even after the Spirit is living in our heart, after we believe that Jesus lived and died in our place, we still struggle against that sinful nature in us and we still sin over and over and over. Even though we know better, even though God has equipped us now to serve him, we still at times choose to serve ourselves. The devil is pretty good at convincing us that our sins aren’t that bad, they aren’t as bad as someone else’s.

Think about it. When Jesus summarized the Law, what did he say? Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself, right? Do you remember that? Love God. Think about what that means. Love God. Have a deep abiding passion for God. Think of what love is and think of how we so often fall short in our love for God. I will give you an example that I think we can all relate to in one way or another during this holiday season. When we go through Advent and Christmas and we have these extra services. We have our Christmas children’s program. We have a candlelight service. We have a Christmas day service. We have a New Year’s Eve service. We have a New Year’s Day service. Have you ever found yourself thinking, “You know what, I am going tomorrow morning. I don’t really want to go tonight. Going once should be enough for God. I went last night. I don’t really need to go today. If God’s not happy with that, if that is not good enough for him, so be it.” Do you ever have those thoughts come across your mind, as though now love for God is something measurable, something quantifiable? “I did it last night. Why do I have to do it today?” As opposed to this deep abiding love for God that thirsts and hungers after righteousness and thirsts and hungers after worshipping him and praising him. Do you ever experience that in your life? I know that I have.

I remember as a kid lying there and trying to be real still so that my parents would take off for church and leave me there. It never happened, but as a kid at times that is where I was spiritually. And now, as you listen to this, if you were at all of these services, did your chest puff out a little bit and did you think to yourself, “God must love me, because I am here all the time”. There is the devil then right at the door with sinful pride, isn’t he?

You and I don’t love God perfectly. You and I can view our service to God as an obligation like paying a bill. At times we just want to keep track of it and say, “There, I’ve done my part”.

Can you imagine how frightening it would be if we would wake up every morning and God loved us only with, “That should be enough”. If God loved us with only, “I’m going to fulfill 99% of the Law and they can take care of the last 1%”. How frightening would that be? You and I are sinners. We don’t love God perfectly. That is obvious to us. Yet, we will struggle and fight with all of our mental agility to come up with, “But that is not as bad as the person who did that or that or that”. What God has done for us is live perfectly in every aspect of the Law beginning with his circumcision and throughout the rest of his life, and even before his circumcision, he was under the Law. But we see him visibly, publicly placing himself under the Law so that he would keep it perfectly. So that now, God’s perfection has become ours. So instead of mental gymnastics and making excuses in our own head and saying, “This isn’t that bad or that isn’t that bad”, we can know that Christ has taken away our sins. He hasn’t loved us with a tote board and says “That’s enough, no more”. He has loved us completely, thoroughly, deeply, absolutely, and taken away every last one of our sins—not only by his death on the cross, but by keeping every jot and tittle, crossing every “t” and dotting every “i” of God’s Law perfectly in our place. Isn’t it thrilling to know that we have a God who loves us that deeply?

At his circumcision, we see how deep his love is. Not only has he fulfilled the Law, but also as he received the name “Jesus”, as he was named, and that name is the fulfillment of God’s promises. The promises that came with the covenant of circumcision some 19 centuries earlier that was given to Abraham. God had promised Abraham that all nations on earth would be blessed through his offspring even though he didn’t have offspring. God kept his promise.

God had sent the angel some nine months earlier who said, “You will have a child even though you are a virgin, and you will give him the name ‘Jesus’ because he will save his people from their sins.” God is faithful to his promises. You and I are often unfaithful to our promises and often by no fault of our own. Circumstances change and we can’t do what we desperately long to do, even when it comes to serving our God. We can’t always do what we deeply desire to do. But God not only has the desire to save us, to give us his Son, but he has the ability to be faithful to every last one of his promises at every second of time throughout eternity. So whether it was spoken millennia before or whether it was spoken nine months earlier, we know that God is going to keep those promises.

Think of the difference that means to us. Instead of fussing and fuming about our sins not being that bad, we can know that God has washed that sin away and that we don’t have to fight against the work of the Law and say, “I don’t want to repent”. We can simply say, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”. We can go back to our baptism and know that that sin has been washed away. That was God’s promise to us. We can come to his altar and kneel and receive his very body and blood. Even if we can’t understand how there can be bread and wine and body and blood at the same time, God says it. He is faithful to his promises. He says that this was given and poured out for you—a very personal promise that our sins are taken away.

God is faithful to his promises. Every time that we hear the name “Jesus”, it is a reminder of that truth. That is what’s in a name and that name rests on us as we live

and serve the God who loved and saved us first. We can rely on his promises to get us through the difficult days, to help us when there is trouble, to strengthen us when we are weak, to comfort us when we mourn, and to console us when we feel lost. He will be faithful. When we turn to him, we can be certain that he will be there with his love.

What's in a name? All the comfort in the world!