

What's in a Name?

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,
And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

Mt. 1:18-25 (C.E.B.)

*O God, open our ears today that we may hear your voice.
Open our hearts that we may experience and share your love.
And may the words I use today leave room for you to speak. Amen.*

I don't know if you've ever noticed it or not, but Joseph has no speaking parts in the Christmas story. He is only mentioned twice by name in the story Luke tells (Lk. 2:4, 39). He is more prominent in Matthew's story, but he never speaks. And after the birth stories in Luke and Matthew, we never see him again in any of the Gospels. In fact, he is only mentioned four other times, and always in relation to Jesus who was known as the "son of Joseph" (Lk 3:24, 30; Jn 1:45, 6:42).

It's almost as if he is invisible. A side character in the story.

And it's not just in the Biblical story that Joseph is all but missing. How many songs can you think of about Joseph? *pause* Admittedly it was not an exhaustive look, but I scanned all of the Advent and Christmas hymns in *Voices Together*. There are no hymns about Joseph, although I found his name mentioned twice. His great-great-great-great grandfather Jesse was mentioned twice as many times! In his book, *Faces at the Manger* Barrie Shepherd refers to classical paintings as well as modern-day portrayals of the nativity. He notes that Joseph seems to be mysteriously present and absent at the same time. But I love how he muses about the role of Joseph as a foster parent. Listen to some of what he says:

It always strikes me as ironic,
yet also strangely fitting,
that in the elegant line drawing of the Nativity
which graces the Christmas Eve bulletin cover
each year at my church –
as in so many such "manger scenes" –
there is no figure of Joseph to be seen. . . .¹

I say this is strangely fitting because,
as I have discovered in reading and research

¹ Shepherd, p. 48

over the years, the role of Joseph –
Joseph of Nazareth, Joseph the Carpenter
Joseph the husband of Mary,
Joseph who stood at the manger –
the role of Joseph at the birth of the Messiah
seems to be an almost transparent one,
to be hardly there at all,
to be that of a virtual nonentity. . . .²

But Joseph,
so far as we can tell
from the biblical record,
Joseph stands there,
simply stands there. . . .³

He goes on to talk about how some parents brood over the futures of their children, worrying about all the things that could go wrong in their lives. Then with a growing concern, sort of like the now popular song *Mary, Did you Know?* he begins to wonder if Joseph could see some of what was to come and began to have fears about the future.

His role as foster parent is to make sure Jesus has what he needs in life to enter into adulthood, ready to accomplish the tasks for which this baby was born. And so Joseph stands there, with a sense of awe about the God who would come to us in this fragile, human form.

Barrie Shepherd continues:

It is important,
crucially important,
that he stand there by that manger,
as he does,
in all his silent misery
of doubt, concern, and fear.
Because if Joseph were not there
there might be no place for us,
for those of us at least –
so many – who recognize and know
that heartache also for our own,
who share the helpless sense
of lostness, of impotence,
in our own lives, our families, our jobs,
in our fearful, threatened world this night.
Yes, in Joseph's look of anguish
we find our place;
we discover that we too
belong beside the manger:
this manger in which are met
God's peace and all our wars and fears.⁴

Joseph stands there, not to get attention, but to protect the baby and his mother; he stands there to watch over them. It is a silent vigil he holds, fading into the background, becoming all but invisible.

² Shepherd, p. 49

³ Shepherd, p. 50

⁴ Shepherd, p. 54.

Over the years, Ronda and I have collected Nativity sets. In fact, we have so many we can't display all of them in our home. The last time we had them all out, we had tags identifying over 150 different sets.

I know others who collect them as well and have displays of various crèche scenes. And in almost all of collected, as well as those I have seen before, Joseph He stands beside Mary gazing at the baby. Or he stands holds the baby. He watches silently.

One of my favorite Nativities in our collection – have 45 favorites, so take that with a grain of salt – but this one. It is one of the two we have where Joseph is

When Matthew tells us the story of the birth of he has more in mind for Joseph than just standing there. speaking part, but he has an important role to play in the



seen several nice those we have simply stands there. behind Mary as she

Ronda says I only one of my favorites is holding the baby.

Jesus, I am convinced He may not have a story.

Matthew makes that clear by connecting this Joseph with the Old Testament Joseph who had dreams, and who saved the nation of Israel by providing a safe haven for them in Egypt (Gen. 37 – 50). So Matthew makes sure we know that Joseph of Nazareth also dreams, and that God speaks to him through those dreams (Mt. 1:20; 2:13, 19).

Like his namesake, Joseph will also protect the baby and his mother by leading them to safety in a foreign land (Mt. 2:14). But the more important role for Joseph is as the one who names the baby.

There is more to naming the child than might first occur to us. In naming him Jesus, Joseph makes Jesus a “son of David.” You see, until the advent of DNA testing, you always knew who the mother of a child was, but you could never be certain about the father. In Jewish culture, paternity was claimed when a child was named.

Joseph may not fully understand the implications of a child whose role will be “God with us,” yet he names the baby “Jesus” just as the angel told him to do. He isn't adopting Jesus. He isn't trying to be a Foster Parent. He is claiming paternity. He is saying he will bring the child into his home and make room in his life for this child; Joseph assumes the role of Dad to Jesus.

He doesn't necessarily know what that will mean, he doesn't know where God will be leading him as a result of his response, but he claims the child as his own. He does that by simply naming the child.

In naming Jesus, Joseph gives the baby a royal lineage and takes away any clouds of suspicion that may have surrounded Mary. And, in fact, it is the closest we have to hearing the voice of Joseph. “Joseph called him Jesus” (Mt. 1:25).

It was a gift, really.

We don't often think of our names as a gift. Some of us know the story of how we got our names. We may have been named after a family member, or a close friend. We had two foster children, whose names reflected their parents' hopes and aspirations for the children, names that also spoke of the era in which they were born. They were a brother and sister named George and Barbara; they were born while the elder George Bush was president.

Once in a while, we encounter someone whose name reflects a part of their birth story. Women with names like April or May or my aunt June, for example. We met a woman last year whose name is Spring. You've known people named Autumn, I'm sure. And we have nick names that reflect some sorts of meanings, like Rusty or Shorty.

But in Biblical times names had meanings. And those meanings were often lived out as their lives unfolded. The problem is that our text suggests there are three different names for this baby. Matthew refers to him as Christ, Emmanuel, and Jesus (Mt. 1:18, 21, 23).

The name Emmanuel is particularly curious, since outside of this passage, the name is never used in the Gospels. In fact, it only appears in one other place in the entire Bible (Is. 7:14)!⁵ I've always found it interesting that we sing songs that refer to Emmanuel, but apparently no one called Jesus by that name, not even his father!

The other name is Christ, a name that is more a title than a name, a title that means he has been anointed or chosen for a sacred purpose.

When I first came here, I was asked how I wanted to be known. And I don't mean to be dismissive when I answer, but it really doesn't matter to me. Some people call me Randy. In many churches I served, I was known as Rev. Randy, as a means of differentiating me from others with the same name. And I know some people want to call me Pastor Randy, for the same reason.

And while I'm comfortable with that, I often find myself wondering why that works for some professions but not others. We have Governor Kelly, and Senator Moran, but not Tow Truck Driver Smith, or Teacher Jones. We have King Charles and Queen Elizabeth, but not Scientist Jane (when speaking about Jane Woodall) or Singer Ray (when referring to Ray Charles).

It's just a curious quirk of the English language, I suppose.

But seriously, despite the way we often hear it said, Christ is not the last name of Jesus. It is a role he plays, a title that is closely connected to a king, any king, not just THE king. In fact, Isaiah uses it as the title for King Cyrus of Persia (Is. 45:1).

There is no question that Jesus fulfilled the roles of Emmanuel and Christ. But Joseph calls him Jesus. "Jesus" is a name that in Aramaic sounds so much like Joshua that you cannot distinguish between the names. Jesus, whose name means "the one who saves," comes like Joshua to fulfill God's promises (Mt. 1:21). Joseph names him, giving Jesus a royal lineage and giving us a reminder of why Jesus was born. He was born "to set his people free," as the hymn says it.⁶

So, Jesus is his name.

Christ is his title.

Emmanuel is his role.

Jesus Christ, Emmanuel.

Joseph's role is to make sure we know that. He does that by simply standing nearby and directing our gaze to the child, the child he has named for us. Even in the manger scenes where Joseph is holding the baby, we find our gaze joining his and looking to Jesus.

⁵ There is another place, but most translations "translate" it rather than using it as a name (Is. 8:10).

⁶ "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," VT # 218

From Barrie Shepherd again.

Let us *be* there,
simply be there just as Joseph was,
with nothing we can do now,
nothing we can bring –
it's far too late for that –
nothing even to be said
except, "Behold – be blessed,
be silent, be at peace."

"Joseph, son of David,
do not fear," the angel said.
And Jim and Alice, Fred and Sue,
Bob and Tom and Jean and Betty, too,
the word to you, to all of us
here at the manger side,
the word is also, "do not fear."
Our God, the Lord and Sovereign,
Maker of heaven and earth,
time and eternity,
of life and death and all that is
and shall be,
has joined us in this moment,
shares our sorrow, knows our fears,
is well acquainted with our foolishness
and petty, selfish ways;
and still and all he brings us peace,
he bears us hope, he tells us,
"Just stop trying for one moment.
Just stop striving, stop all your doing
for this night of nights
and then believe and be, accept
and live, and know that you are mine
and you are blessed now and forevermore."⁷

I invite you to join Joseph and become a witness to this miraculous event when God comes to us as Emmanuel, the one we call Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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⁷ Shepherd, pp. 57-58

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