

What's In a Name?

January 1, 2017

Matthew 2:15-21

How did you get your name? Think about that for a moment.

For me, the process has always been shrouded in mystery. I asked my mom how she and Dad arrived at “Lowell Ralph Hennigs.” After sixty years, I’ve gotten used to it. But it does not trip pleasingly past the lips. Nor does my name call to mind any famous figures of great repute.

Worse yet, for some months before my birth, I was destined to be known as “Mark Allan Hennigs.” In hindsight, I could have lived with that label. But somehow, in the days leading to my birth, things changed. No one, including my parents, could explain how the transformation took place. So here I am.

Worst of all, eight years later the name “Mark Allan Hennigs” was deemed appropriate for my little brother! Perhaps Mom and Dad learned something from raising me!

How did you get your name?

Eight days after Christmas, Joseph and Mary gave Jesus his name. They took him to the Temple for his circumcision and naming—just as the Old Testament law required. When Jesus asked his parents how he got his name, they would have had a ready answer. We read the story in Matthew, chapter one. An angel spoke to Joseph in a dream:

‘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.’

Our Lord, who redeems us from our bondage to sin, has a name. If you research this name you will see its roots in the Hebrew: Joshua, which means “rescuer,” “deliverer,” or “my help.”

Jesus—“the One who Saves”—that’s his name.

This name reveals who God is—who God really is. This name is a gift of intimacy with God. Martin Luther often reminded his readers that apart from the revelation of Christ, we can only see God’s backside. We can know that God is, but not of God’s disposition towards us.

In Christ, we not only see God’s face, but we see a face that is full of grace and mercy for a fallen world. In the face of the infant born in Bethlehem, the face of the Crucified One, the face of the one who rose from the dead, and face of the one who comes to us in water, bread, and wine, we see the face of God.

Jesus—“the One who Saves”—that’s his name.

How did you get your name? You got it in baptism. Next week we will remember the baptism of Jesus. He is called God’s beloved Son. We are baptized into that love. And so we are called

children of God. That will be our theme during the season of Epiphany—“Called.” Today we remember how Jesus was called the Savior. In the next few months we will remember how we are called his people.

Calling people by name is very important. So, next week we will have a “Nametag Sunday.” That will help our new people get to know us all better. And it will remind us that we have our real names through Jesus. And we will be able to call each other by name.

Jesus—“the One who Saves”—that’s his name.

There are those whose names have been stolen from them. For example, last evening, many historically African American churches observed the custom of a “Watch Night Service.” The service commemorates the night of December 31, 1862, when free and freed blacks in the North and enslaved blacks in the South prayed as they waited for President Abraham Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation into law.

Contemporary Watch Night observances give African American Christians a chance to join with family members and church members to thank God for advances in making African Americans full members of American society, and to pray for the places where progress is still needed and slow in coming. These services celebrate the day when they got their names back.

It would be inappropriate for white Christians to celebrate Watch Night as if it were our own. But we give thanks today as our African American sisters and brothers claim their names as fellow citizens as well as fellow Christians. And we in the white churches can spend some time to repent of our silent complicity in structural racism and to recommit ourselves to the ongoing and hard work of racial justice and repair.

Jesus—“the One who Saves”—that’s his name.

How did you get your name? You were baptized in the name of the One who Saves. You are called children of God in that baptism. You carry the name of the Savior on your brow. Wear that baptismal name with joy and hope today and every day! Let’s pray...