

ever used the name. Luckily, new parents Mary and Joseph did not have to come up with a name for their child: an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him to name the baby Jesus.

Mary and Joseph. In today's passage we encounter four names: Joseph, Mary, Jesus and Immanuel. Each contains a key for helping us to live into our lives as Christians. The name Joseph comes from the Hebrew root Yosef, which means, "He will add," or "God increases." In the Old Testament, we meet one named Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, who developed a large ego, prompting his brothers to sell him into slavery. Through a series of God-ordained circumstances, Joseph gets appointed manager of the food supply of Egypt during a devastating famine. This Joseph showed God's increase in his personal life - rising from slave to government official - and in his public life by saving Israel from the famine.

Mary's fiancé Joseph is also a wonderful example of God's increase. When it would have been much easier to walk away from Mary and the child she was having, Joseph listened to God and stayed with her. He allowed God to work in and through his life, and the lives of Mary and their child. At the prompting of God, Joseph names the baby Jesus, takes his family to Egypt when threatened and brings them back when an angel tells him it is safe to do so.

Joseph consistently gets out of the way to make room for God to do God's work in his life. He allows God to add to him, rather than trying to force his own will, even when God's plans completely alter the course of his life. We need to be more like Joseph, someone in whom the presence of God grows large.

Mary's name is a bit more complicated. If we consider the Egyptian roots of her name, it means "beloved" or "cherished." In Hebrew, however, the word *miryam*, from which "Mary" comes, means "rebellion." That may sound cute as the name of an infant, but hardly the name you want for a child in their terrible twos or teens.

In a sense, Mary needs both of those qualities for the work to which she is called. She is the beloved one, cherished of God, who is selected to carry and give birth to the Messiah. When the angel Gabriel first appears to her to tell her about her role in the Christmas story, he calls her "favored one." On the other hand, that rebellious streak - the ability to follow her inner voice when others might try to convince her to behave differently - will come in handy throughout her pregnancy.

Her courage allows her to travel to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah when the angel tells her to go. It sustains her through the journey to Bethlehem and Jesus' birth out in a stable. Most importantly, her rebellious nature gives her the ability to say 'yes' to being used by God in this way when she knows the consequences could be dire. We need to be more like Mary, rebelliously courageous because we know we are loved by God.

A name for the baby. While Mary's pregnancy certainly did not make things easy for her and Joseph, God did take one thing off their plates. They did not have to come up with a name for their child. God gave them the perfect name for him.

You might think God would give this special child a unique name. He could have been given one of the names for the Messiah: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, or Prince of Peace. He could have been named for the things he would do: Healer, Teacher, Miracle-Worker, Feeder of Five Thousand, One Who Walks on Water, Forgiver of Sins or something like that. Instead, he is given a name that was fairly common among first-century Jews: Jesus.

The angel tells Joseph, "Call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The name Jesus means "he saves" or "he will save us." As we saw with Joseph's name, "he will add," the "he" was usually thought to be God. First-century Hebrews living under the occupation of Rome, named their children Jesus, "he saves," as a cry to God. It was a way of claiming the promise that God would come and set them free.

In this Jesus, however, the name will take on a new meaning. Jesus will proclaim a new kind of freedom that God is bringing to the whole world. In his death and resurrection we receive the forgiveness of our sins and are saved through him. This Jesus is different from the others named "he saves." He is the fulfillment of God's promise to save us.

Just to be clear, Jesus' last name was not and is not "Christ." Christ is a title, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word, Messiah. He was probably more commonly known as Jesus of Nazareth, as the Roman soldiers posted on his cross. Or possibly as Jesus bar Joseph, that is, Jesus son of Joseph. Or, maybe he was known as Jesus the *tekton*, Jesus the handyman or carpenter, as it is sometimes translated. But, as Peter would later understand and as we know today, he is Jesus the Christ. He came to save us from our sins and set us free through our faith and trust in him.

Matthew also gives us another name for Jesus, one we sing throughout the Christmas season. He tells us that Jesus' birth fulfills the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')." This title, if not a name, is an important one for us to remember. God was with us in the person of Jesus 2,000 years ago, and God is with us in our lives today. In the midst of our joys and sorrows, we need to remember Immanuel, God is with us.

Names matter. When naming a baby, parents may stress out a little too much, trying to find the perfect name, a unique name or even a stage name. However, when we come to Christ and give our lives to him, we receive a new name: Christian. There's much we can learn from the names Joseph, Mary, Jesus and Immanuel as we seek to live into that title. We need to be a little more like Joseph, allowing God to add to our lives by surrendering our will to his. We need to be a little more like Mary, perceived as courageous and rebellious because we know we are a beloved child of God. We need to follow that inner voice of God, calling us to say 'yes' to God's plan over our own.

This Christmas, we remember that Jesus saves us from our sin and offers us true freedom to live life to the fullest as his disciples. And as 2016 draws to a close and we look forward to 2017 not knowing what the future may hold, we remember Immanuel, God with us. We never travel alone. We are always in the presence of God. Living into the names of "He adds," "the rebellious/beloved one," "He saves" and "God with us," we grow into God's desire for our lives.

Prayer: God of Wonders, we give thanks for Jesus who saves us, and that you, Immanuel, are always with us. This Advent-time we remember Mary and Joseph, giving thanks for their faithfulness, courage and obedience, stepping out into the unknown in the strength of your Spirit, playing their part in the fulfilment of your plan to bring your prodigal people home again. We pray that their example might be the pattern of our lives, that when your gentle whisper breaks through the clamor of this world and into our small corner, we might be ready to listen, and having listened, to act. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen

Sources:

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The Name Game

Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 9:2-7 and Matthew 1:18-25

Atley, Destiny, Acacia, Nestor, Sparsh, Lively, Bobo, Crimson, Aero, Lysander, Elspeth, Melrose, Paislee, River and Zyron - these are just some of the names that have been pinned on defenseless infants recently. Where did they come from? Who knows! Sometimes you wonder what parents are thinking when they chose their child's name.

Many parents want the name to be as special as their child. Celebrities are often good at coming up with unique names for their children. Frank Zappa famously named his daughter Moon Unit and son Dweezil (Dweezil's actual name is Ian Donald Calvin Euclid). Gwyneth Paltrow named her daughter Apple. Beyonce and Jay Z gave their daughter the name Blue Ivy. Alicia Silverstone named her son Bear Blu. Tom Cruise named his daughter Suri, and actor Jason Lee named a son Pilot Inspektor. Shouldn't there be a law?

Maybe parents put too much pressure on themselves trying to come up with the perfect name. As Shakespeare famously wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." It's true for flowers, but does it apply to human beings?

Sure, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but names really do matter. It is difficult to imagine Marion Mitchell Morrison as the quintessential cowboy, but his stage name, John Wayne, is just about perfect. Would Peter Hernandez have been as exciting a Super Bowl halftime show as Bruno Mars was? Would Ilyena Vasilievna Mironov have been the Academy Award winning actress that Helen Mirren is? Could Reginald Dwight have the popularity of Elton John, or Robert Zimmerman the influence of Bob Dylan?

Names are also important in the Bible and sometimes people had their names changed. Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah when God promises they will be forerunners of a great nation. Their son is Isaac, whose name means "laughter," because the parents laugh when God tells them they will have a child in their old age. When Jacob finishes a night of wrestling with God, he is given the name Israel, which means, "one who struggles with God." Jesus styled one of his disciples Peter, "the Rock" long before Dwayne Johnson