

1 Has anyone ever made fun of your name? I've mentioned before that in junior high school I was given the wonderful name of "Reinfart." For some reason, people enjoy making fun of names. Here are some more examples: Someone named "sky" is greeted with, "Hello, Sky! I'm, ground, it's so nice to finally meet!" Someone named "Justin" is asked, "Are you just in time? Just in case? Or this just in?" One man named "Hunter" is frequently called "Fisher" because he likes fishing more than hunting!¹ And the list goes on. Each year we invent new names for our children and each year, other children and even adults find ways to abbreviate or make fun of those names.

The first gift given a newborn child is their name. We put on our names before we even put on our first set of clothes, and we carry those names throughout our lives. Do you know the story of how and why you received your name? I received my middle name, Frank, as a way to honor my mother's father who bore that as a first name. How many of you received one of your names in a similar way? I received my last name, Reinhart, because that was my father's last name. I'm guessing that some of you received your last name in the same way, but some of you didn't. Times change. And my first name? My parents simply liked that name. There may well be some historical meaning of "William," but I'm certain it had nothing to do with why I bear that name, and even less to do with the nickname I have gone by all my life: Bill. Our names are intimate gifts that distinguish us from others and become a central part of who we are and of how we're known by others.

Today we continue our journey of reclaiming our wonder of the season of Christmas. The names we'll hear today will be familiar- Emmanuel, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor. We hear them at least once every year during the Advent season. Let's try to hear them again this morning for the first time. The original Christmas was a time marked with signs and wonders. This Christmas can be as well if we open our hearts to reclaim the wonder of the name of Jesus.

2 Here are just a few of the trending names for those born in the United States. I can't say I've met any "Willow's" yet. How do parents come up with these names, anyway?

¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/1tbl3p/redditors_what_is_the_most_annothing_joke_about/

Sometimes children receive their names in reference to the month they're born in. Children named "June" are statistically more likely to have been born in June. Children named May are more likely to have been born in May. Children named Joy are more likely to have been born around Christmas. Sometimes children are named after a favorite brand, like "Mercedes" or "Apple." Some names are simply given to attract attention, like the daughter of Frank and Gail Zappa, who bears the unique name of "Moon Unit."² Other names are given with deliberate contortions of spelling that are designed to make them stand out on a teacher's roster or on a job application. For example, the name "Emily" can be spelled with an "i" and a "y," an "e" and a "y" (Emely), an "i" and two "e's" (Emilee), an "i" and one "e" (Emile), or with two "m's" and two "e's" (Emmalee).

Times change, and so do naming conventions. Thousands of years ago, before the advent of the internet, Facebook, and the endless lists of popular baby names; before the advent of the ultrasound and pregnancy tests, more thought was usually given to naming children because it was thought that one's name shaped one's destiny. Because names were seen to be such a central part of a person's identity, when names were changed, it signified an important change in a person's purpose and destiny. For example, we know that God gave Abram and Sarai new names, Abraham and Sarah, after announcing his promise that they would become parents of a new and blessed nation. Jesus gave Simon the name of "Peter," meaning "rock," as a sign that Peter was to lead the apostles in carrying out the work of Jesus on earth. The names given to Jesus are even more packed with meaning, none of them given casually, each one a reflection of God's character and purpose in coming to us on Christmas Day.

3 When we think about the birth of Jesus, we tend to take all the things we've heard and read about Christmas and smash them together into one story. What we actually have in the Bible is two different stories written by two different people with two slightly different perspectives. It's Luke who relates the story of the shepherds and the angels, while Matthew tells us about the wise men, an event that took place about two years later. There's another surprising difference between Matthew's and Luke's account of the birth of Jesus that you

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon_Zappa

might not have noticed. It's only Luke who writes about what we call "The Annunciation," the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary to announce that's she carrying God's child. Matthew, writing to Jews who would have been more concerned with Joseph's role in this story, chose to focus on the dream in which an angel reassured Joseph that Mary had not been unfaithful to him. The two stories are quite different, but there is one striking point of agreement. In both angelic visits, God's messenger gave the same instruction: "You are to give him the name Jesus"³ Why is that? If a child's name is the first gift given by a parent, then why did God instruct both Joseph and Mary to name their son Jesus?

4 Believe it or not, the name of Jesus would have conjured up images more like this one for Mary and Joseph rather than the ones you probably think of. Yes, those are trumpets, but it's not a parade. This is a children's version of the battle of Jericho, one of many epic military victories over the native Canaanites through which Joshua lead Israel into the promised land. The name Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name, Joshua. Joshua, you might remember, is the man who took over after Moses brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. What you probably don't remember is that Joshua was given that name by Moses, right before he went into Canaan as one of the twelve spies. His original name, Hoshea, meant salvation. His new name, Joshua, meant God saves. I'll let you read more about that in the study booklets we have out in the lobby. What I think is really intriguing here is that this shows us exactly why there was so much confusion over who Jesus was. The Jews were expecting God to save them, but they were all expecting someone like Joshua, someone to lead them in a great military victory over their Roman occupiers. Instead, Jesus, "God saves," came to save them from something else entirely.

5 We refer to Jesus by so many different names. I mentioned one of my favorites last week: "Bright Morning Star." This time of year we especially remember the names given by the prophet Isaiah: Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Each of those names is important, but the name of Jesus cuts to the very center of our faith. It's the name we're most familiar with, and so maybe it's also the name that brings us the least wonder. And yet, it's the name that should inspire the greatest wonder! Jesus means

³ Luke 1:31; Matthew 1:21, NIV

“God saves!” Think about that for a second. His very name is a resounding affirmation of God’s goodness, love, and mercy. Advent is a time of anticipating and celebrating that “God Saves” is making a personal appearance on earth to save us all. What is it that Jesus saves us from? The angel Gabriel spelled that out quite clearly to Joseph in his dream: “[Y]ou are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”⁴

6 What is it you need saving from today? Remember, Jesus didn’t live and die and then rise again to save us from all the difficult circumstances we may find ourselves in. Jesus himself wasn’t spared difficult trials. Jesus came to save us from the grips of sin. Sin is the accumulation of the choices we’ve made, the attitudes we’re holding onto, and the actions we’ve taken or failed to take that have made the name Jesus mean something altogether other than what God intended. It doesn’t matter how ashamed you are about your sin. It doesn’t matter whether you feel worthy of being saved. Jesus is coming, “God Saves!”

There’s a breathtaking scope of mercy, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness wrapped up in that one simple name, Jesus. There is an endless and overwhelming flood of love in that name. There are rivers of living water springing forth to wash you clean in that name. Jesus, God Saves! So the only question you need to get settled in your heart today is this: “Do I really want to be saved, or would I honestly prefer to wallow in my sin?”

God is offering us all the chance to receive a new name, just like a newborn baby, to put on a new identity with a new purpose and destiny. That name is “Christian,” and it means one dramatic and life-changing thing: Christ-follower, follower of the one named Jesus, “God Saves.” Are you ready to claim or reclaim that name for yourself today, to be born anew and by God’s grace, to make new choices? Advent is the perfect time to change your name and let the power of God reveal to you the wonder of Christmas. Please pray with me.

Oh holy Jesus, we confess that our sins have made a mockery of your name and brought injury onto ourselves and others. Forgive us, we pray. Crucify our old lives and give us new birth, so that as we celebrate your birth in Bethlehem, we may also celebrate our rebirth. Amen.

⁴ Matthew 1:21, NIV



**609 8th Street NW
Buffalo, MN 55313
763-682-3538**

Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com