

Homily based on the readings from December 24, 2023 (Isaiah 62.1-5;  
Acts 13.16-17, 22-25; Matthew 1.1-25)

*She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus.* The Archangel Gabriel, when he appeared to Saint Joseph, issued exactly two commands: first, to take Mary into his home and, second, to name the child *Jesus* – Jesus, which literally means “the Lord saves.” It is remarkable, although it should not surprise us, that the Archangel would give Saint Joseph such an explicit directive.

A common theme from today’s readings is the power of a name:

[A]nd they shall *name* him Emmanuel.

[Y]ou shall be called by a new *name* pronounced by the mouth of  
the LORD.

At your *name* they rejoice all the day.

Indeed, the Gospel passage we just heard begins with a somewhat daunting list of names – forty-two, to be precise. So, to borrow a line from *Romeo and Juliet*, “what’s in a name?”

A name not only allows us to distinguish one person from another – at a fundamental level, it tells us who a person *is*. One of the most amazing revelations God gave the Jewish people was telling them his name – which he did when speaking with Moses from out of the burning bush. That name, which is often written as the four letters *Y-H-W-H*, was considered so holy in Jesus’ time that it was only uttered once a year – by the high priest on the Day of Atonement, within the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. The name of God is holy because it is an expression of God himself – the source of all holiness.

Likewise, Jesus’ name – the Lord saves – tells us who he is. His very nature, his very being, is directed toward our salvation. Another name that is given to Jesus is *Emmanuel*, “God is with us.” The name of Jesus

is a direct reflection of his relationship with God the Father. As Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians:

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

As you may know, Jesus Christ is not the first Jesus to appear in the Bible. The Greek name *Jesus* is actually equivalent to the Hebrew name *Joshua*. The first Joshua in the Bible was Joshua the son of Nun, who led the Israelites into the promised land after the death of Moses. There was actually a second Joshua in the Old Testament, a Jewish high priest mentioned in the Book of Ezra. Jesus Christ, of course, combines and transcends the qualities of both his predecessors. He is the source of our salvation, the high priest who offers *himself* in atonement for our sins.

Even the name *Joseph* – which seems somewhat ordinary and commonplace – possesses a deeper meaning. As we just heard, the

Archangel Gabriel “appeared to [Joseph] in a dream.” If we recall the Book of Genesis, there was another Joseph – also the son of a man named Jacob – to whom God communicated through dreams. *That* Joseph saved the children of Israel by sheltering them in Egypt. *This* Joseph protected the child Jesus and the Blessed Mother, ultimately bringing them both to Egypt to escape the murderous rage of King Herod. Joseph’s name, his very being, was dedicated to this one, supremely important task: safeguarding and nurturing the Son of God.

Not only do names matter for people who lived thousands of years ago, but also for us here today. The promise contained in today’s readings is that God will grant us a new name:

No more shall people call you “Forsaken,”  
or your land “Desolate,”  
but you shall be called “My Delight,”  
and your land “Espoused.”

So, as we head home from Mass, contemplating the joys of the Christmas season, I ask everyone to consider one simple question: by what name do we want to be known? If we accept him into our heart, Christ will transform our lives from desolation and emptiness to joy and delight. We “shall be called by a new name pronounced by the mouth of the LORD.” Through Jesus, “the Lord Saves,” each of us shall be made whole, and given the most exalted and honorable name that any human being could possibly hope to possess. In the words of the Apostle John: “See what love the Father has given us, that *we* should be called *children of God.*”