

Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room: Do You See the Miracle of Christmas?

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

December 22, 2019

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Have you ever heard of Kabalarian Philosophy? I would be surprised if you had. It has been called the world's smallest religion, and I stumbled across it recently. A man named Alfred J. Parker started this in the late 1930s in British Columbia. According to their literature, "Mr. Parker made an independent discovery of the connection between numbers, the symbols of language, and the forces of intelligence which comprise the human mind."

I would place Kabalarian Philosophy in the same category as your daily astrological reading and fortune cookies you'll get after lunch today at the Chinese restaurant, but that's just my opinion. I did find one thing interesting. Mr. Parker believed that our names have hidden forces that influence our lives. The web page for Kabalarian Philosophy has a service where you can type in your name, and by a mathematical analysis of your name it will reveal your hidden influences. Well, I just couldn't resist. So I typed in DAVID. Here's what the mathematical analysis of Kabalarian Philosophy revealed about me:

- Your first name, **David**, makes you independent, resourceful, practical, and patient. So far so good!
- You could be inventive along scientific or technical lines.
- Although you are not naturally spontaneous in musical or artistic expression, you can develop technical proficiency along these lines. I am going to join this choir yet!
- You are fussy about details and seek perfection in whatever you undertake. Just look at my lawn or ask my wife!

I liked what the mathematical analysis revealed about me until I came to this last one:

- Weaknesses in health centre in the head.... Wouldn't you know!

There was a time when names really did have a meaning specific to an individual. And sometimes, if your life situation changed dramatically, your name changed to reflect that. You may remember the man in the book of Acts named Saul. He had a profound encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. That event was so significant for Saul that he was given a new name: Paul. In the Old Testament, Abram and Sarai were called into a covenant with God. It was such a dramatic moment in Jewish history that their names were changed to Abraham and Sarah.

Biblical names were not chosen because they sounded nice. Names were descriptive. They said something about you. You were called “the son or daughter of your father’s name.” The son of Joseph. The daughter of Abraham. The name Isaac means “to laugh” because his elderly mother laughed when she learned that she was expecting a child. The name Peter means “stone” or “rock,” and Jesus said that he would build his church upon Peter, upon a strong foundation.

This is why the statement of the angel in Matthew 1 is so important: “And you are to name him Jesus.” In that statement, in that name, we see the miracle of Christmas.

So what does Jesus’ name tell us about this baby boy born to Mary? It was not just a moniker. It wasn’t a nickname or a handle. Jesus’ name tells us who he was...and is.

First, it was a prophetic name. The Greek name, Jesus, is Yeshua in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. In English, Yeshua is Joshua. That prophetic name tells us something important about Jesus. The name Joshua means “Yahweh (God) helps or saves.” That is exactly what happened in the Old Testament with the successor of Moses, whose name was Joshua, the son of Nun. God selected Moses to be the one to deliver the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt. Slavery in Egypt was awful. The people moaned under the oppressive hand of the Pharaoh. God sent the plagues, remember, to convince Pharaoh to let God’s people go. But stubborn Pharaoh refused. Finally, the last plague, the death of the firstborn, was so overwhelming that Pharaoh released the people of Israel.

Moses was their champion. He led them from Egypt into the desert where they wandered for forty years, gradually making their way to the Promised Land, the land of Canaan, that great land flowing with milk and

honey promised to their forefathers and mothers. While Moses got them to the Promised Land, he did not lead them in. Moses died and was buried in the land of Moab, just shy of the Promised Land. It was his successor Joshua, the son of Nun, who led the people of Israel across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. God said to Joshua,

As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them.

Many of you remember the story of the crossing of the Jordan River and the conquest of the land of Canaan. Joshua was a military master, and he led his people to violent and bloody victory. The conquest of the land of Canaan was a great and dark event in ancient Israel's history.

Joshua: "Yahweh (God) helps or saves." That was the prophetic name given to Mary's baby. Jesus was a new Joshua, God's new deliverer, the one selected by God to lead God's people into a new era. But Jesus wasn't a military master; he was a Prince of Peace. His victory wasn't won with violence or bloodshed; it was won with love and grace.

Oh yes, a name says a lot. "You are to name him Jesus," the angel said. It was a prophetic name.

Second, it was a people's name. The name Jesus was actually a popular name in the first century. An ancient historian named Josephus, who lived near the time of Jesus, claimed to know 20 different people named Jesus. Luke includes another person named Jesus in Jesus' genealogy (Luke 3:29). Mary's baby was given a people's name, one that united him with the common people of this world rather than separated him from them.

We see this in the circumstances of his birth also. He wasn't born in a palace and laid in a gilded bassinette. We don't actually know what the immediate setting of Jesus' birth was like. The text doesn't say. We do know that his family wasn't deemed important enough to create room in the local inn. Many today speculate that the baby Jesus was born in a cave-like setting where animals were kept. The text is clear that he was placed in a manger, a trough for feeding domesticated animals. It was humble, very common.

Our modern carols suggest that angels were present at his birth, perhaps singing to welcome the birth of God's Son. However, nothing in the text says that angels were present at his birth. It was probably extremely uncomfortable, damp, cool, and threatening. We can imagine that the cries of young Mary pierced the night sky as she and Joseph welcomed Jesus into this world.

Yes, a name says a lot. "You are to name him Jesus," the angel said. It was the people's name.

And finally, it is a personal name. This baby Jesus went back to his hometown of Nazareth where he grew up. As a young man, he began to preach about the Kingdom of God. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. Clearly the power of God rested upon him. Twelve men became his closest followers. Sometimes they understood him, and sometimes they didn't. One day, as his fame grew across the land, he asked those twelve men, "Who do people say that I am?"

They said that some of the people thought he was John the Baptist. Some thought that he was the prophet Elijah or one of the other prophets. Then Jesus asked them this very important question, "But who do you say that I am?"

That is the question that continues to echo through the halls of history. It rises before us this fourth Sunday of Advent: Who do you say that he is? It is a personal name.

"And you are to name him Jesus." It was more than a moniker. It was more than a nickname or a handle. Jesus' name tells us who he *was*. He was God's New Prophet, called to deliver God's people. He belonged to the people, the common men and women. And Jesus' name tells us who he *is*. He is the miracle of Christmas. So let every heart prepare him room.

Closing Prayer

Lord, on this Sunday before we celebrate your birth, we hear your personal question. Help each of us to say in the deep places, where we wrestle with life and truth, that you are our Lord and Savior. Amen.