

What's in a Name?

Matthew 1:18-25

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I've always heard that if you are trying to write a book, the most important line you will write is the very first sentence. You want to grab the reader's attention from the very beginning. And there certainly are some very famous first lines of novels: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." That's how Charles Dickens begins *The Tale of Two Cities*. Or "My name is Ishmael" is the opening sentence of the classic *Moby Dick*. You want to grab the reader's attention from the very beginning.

Well, apparently Matthew, the writer of this Gospel, didn't learn that in school, because he opens his gospel with a yawner of a sentence: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of Judah..." And on it goes, name after name. Forty-two generations of names. It's certainly not the kind of thing that's going to grab the reader's attention. In fact, I would venture to guess that when you start to read Matthew's gospel, you might give a quick skim of these odd and usual names—Abijah, Jehoshaphat, Salathiel—and then move on to the good stuff, about Joseph and Mary and the baby.

We're going to get to that good stuff in just a moment, but I want to spend just a minute looking at this list of names, because there are a few surprises here. I've printed this first chapter of Matthew on an insert in today's bulletin. Let's look at it for a couple of minutes.

There are some familiar names in this list: patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and kings David and Solomon. But reading over this list, one of the things that jumps out at you is that there are some women's names included here: Tamar (v. 3), Rahab and Ruth (v. 5), and the woman whose name we know—it's Bathsheba—but who is identified here only as "the wife of Uriah" (v. 6).

In a patriarchal society where women didn't count for much, and when the family line was passed on through the father, it's rather surprising that some women are mentioned here. Why do you think that Matthew would include the names of these women? Remember: Matthew is giving us Jesus' family tree; these are the people from whom Jesus, the Savior of the world, is descended. I think Matthew is making several points here. One is that even though the general feeling throughout society in that day was that women didn't count for much and that only the men really mattered, Matthew is making sure that we understand that women too played a vitally important part in bringing our Savior into the world. Jesus is Lord of all—women and men.

But if you look specifically at these women, you see another point Matthew is making. Take Ruth, for example. Do you remember the story of Ruth from the Old Testament? Ruth was not a Hebrew; she was not one of the chosen people. She was a Gentile, a foreigner, a Moabite. Is Matthew telling us here that Jesus has come into the world not just for the chosen few, but for all people, even Gentiles?

And then there's Bathsheba. She was the woman who King David fell for, conceived a child with her while she was still married to someone else—Uriah. So in

order to make things look kosher, David had Uriah killed. It was a sinful, shameful mark on King David. And here Matthew identifies her as “the wife of Uriah”—just to remind the reader of the whole sordid affair. Is Matthew telling the reader that Jesus came from...and came for...sinners?

And before we move on from this list of names, let me mention one more: in v. 10: “Manasseh was father of Amos...” Well, if you read the Old Testament, you see that Manasseh’s son was named Amon, not Amos. So did Matthew just make a mistake? I don’t think so. I think he wanted to remind his readers about the Old Testament prophet Amos who bravely brought God’s word to the people. I think Matthew is telling us something about this Jesus whose birth we are getting ready to read about: that he is the one who fully, perfectly brings God’s word to the world, in fact, he is God’s word made flesh.

In this list of names that rarely gets much attention, Matthew is giving us a foretaste of who Jesus is: he is the one who brings God’s word to the world—including sinners, foreigners, all people.

Well, before we get too bogged down in that list of names, let’s move to today’s reading: Matthew 1:18-25. Follow along as I read it.

Matthew 1:18-25

After giving us the names of more than forty of his ancestors, now we look at the name given to this baby.

I remember when my wife told me that we were going to have a baby. For the remainder of the nine months—waiting for the baby to be born—we agonized over what to name the child. Back then we didn’t have advance knowledge if the baby would be a boy or a girl, so we came up with a list of possible boy names and girl names. One name would climb to the top of the list, then for one reason or another we would discard it. I even remember looking at those little books you can get in the check-out line at the grocery store. One was titled “A Thousand Names for a Boy”, and another “A Thousand Names for a Girl.” The boys’ names covered the entire alphabet—from Aaron to Zwingli. It’s tough coming up with the name for a baby.

In the passage we have just read, two names are given for this child who is to be born. There is the verse that says that all this took place to fulfill what was said by the prophet: a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel. The name means God with us.

Emmanuel, God with us.

As you read the story of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament, time and time again they wondered if God was with them, and time and time again God said it, “I am with you.” God sent Moses to go to Pharaoh to demand the release of the Hebrews. Moses was reluctant to undertake this mission, but God said, “I will be with you” (Exodus 4:12). In fact, five times Moses refuses God’s call, and five times God said, “I will be with you.”

And so it was over and over again in the Bible. God promised to the prophet Isaiah: “Come close, listen carefully. I’ve never kept secrets from you. I’ve always been with you” (Isaiah 48:16, *The Message*).

Another less well known prophet named Haggai says it also. “Haggai, God’s messenger, preached God’s message to the people: ‘I am with you. This is God’s word.’” (Haggai 1:13, *The Message*).

Emmanuel, God with us. That’s the promise that comes to us in this baby whose birth we are celebrating. He is God with us.

Now the fact that God is with us can either be good news or bad news. If this God who is with us is an angry, judgmental, wrathful God, then it’s not such good news that this God is with us. That’s where the other name comes in. The angel appeared to Joseph and told him, “You shall name him Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins.” That name, Jesus, puts a whole new light on what it means to say that God is with us. The God who is with us is not the angry, wrathful God, but the God who has come with only one purpose: to save the people from their sins. And not just some people, not just a chosen few, but all people—men and women, Jews and Gentiles, saints and sinners. The name Jesus affirms that God is a God of love whose love for us has no limits. In Jesus we see a love that will even go all the way to the cross for us. In Jesus we see that there is nothing we can do which will cause God to stop loving us. In Jesus we see that there is no sin we can commit which is beyond God’s power to forgive.

I read recently about David Livingston, the great 19th century missionary-explorer-medical doctor who spent so much time in equatorial Africa. Whenever he would return to his home in London to report on what he had seen and learned, his friends would often urge him not to go back, fearing for the danger and terrors he faced in what was called “the dark continent.” But Livingston was a Christian, and he believed the promise of Jesus. So he would reply to his cautious friends that he had the promise of a gentleman to be with him, even to the end of the world. And so he would return to Africa, believing that God—the God named Jesus—was with him.

So Matthew opens his gospel with a long list of names. And at the end of that list we hear the two names that mean everything: Emmanuel, God is with us. Jesus, who saves us from our sins.

Emmanuel, Jesus, that is the one whose birth we celebrate.✠