

Matthew 1: 18-25 "I With You Am" Rev. Janet Chapman 12/23/18

What's in a name? Were you named after anyone? Does your name have a specific meaning in another language or culture? The study of names is an actual science called onomatology – on a website which claims to research and identify the origin of proper nouns, my name comes from the English origin of Jane and means "God is gracious." Having found that out, I wanted to know why my parents named me as such? I asked my mom, thinking maybe they had wanted to make a grand theological statement about the nature of God's grace or better yet express their gratitude to God for my gracious presence, but instead my mom fumbled around for an answer, furrowing her brow and scratching her head. Finally she said "we just liked the name Janet." What a letdown. Come to find out from my siblings, I was a mistake – leave it to your siblings to tell you the cold, hard truth. Ten years after my parents thought they were done having kids, I showed up, so mom and dad had to think of something. My parents tried to soften the blow by saying "I was a pleasant surprise so they wanted a pleasant name." Hmm... I know what that means. All the family names were taken and no one had the time or energy to find out what my name meant so they made the best of it. Now I wouldn't change it for the world because it is who I am, but in my younger, more immature years, I wanted to be Angelina or Melissa or Frangelica – whatever ended with an "a" promised success, wealth, and beauty.

I remembered this story when Janet Phillips and I were sitting next to each other at last Sunday's Shasta Brass concert at the mall. We were joking that it was the Janet couch and wondered who else we would let in the club? Then we have this text today where Joseph is told to name the baby Jesus, meaning "he saves," and the prophet says he will be called

“Emmanuel,” which means “God with us.” What’s in a name? In this case, it is a baby named “Save” – can you imagine having a baby named “Save”? Then there is “God is with us” – those are some “high-powered” names connected to some pretty heavy-duty baggage. No doubt it labels you as belonging to a very exclusive club.

You may remember a bit of Jewish history with regards to names for the Divine. Moses is looking for reassurances about speaking on God’s behalf to the slaves and leading them to freedom. He says to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name? then what shall I say?’” God says, “I am who I am....Tell them ‘I am’ sent you.” In Hebrew, the word is “Yahweh,” a holy name, holier than any other name. It would be a name that Israelites would not even utter out loud, powerful, mysterious, wonderful and utterly incomprehensible. Then, the angel in the New Testament tucked neatly away in Joseph’s dream shares another name for holiness. Emmanuel – God with us, the Spirit of God active in the world as never before. We get “I am” from the Old Testament and “God is with us” from the New Testament. What if we consolidate them to find a name which encompasses both Old and New? Take Yahweh’s name, “I am,” split it apart and place the name from the New Testament “God with you or us” smack dab in the middle, and you get this all -encompassing name that Matthew is trying to relate: “I with you Am.” You see it written in your bulletin as the message title. The Hebrew language sometimes places verbs like “to be” “am” and “are” at the end of sentences rather than in the middle so “I With You Am” could be a translation of what God is saying through the naming of this child soon to be born to Mary and Joseph – “I With You Am.” We used to joke in seminary that such language structure sounded like Yoda talking in Star Wars. You know, Yoda says

things like “When 900 years old you reach, look as good you will not.” Believing that Yoda secretly spoke Hebrew was our feeble attempt to survive the Basic 101 class. “I With You Am.” It is a mouthful no matter how you look at it as it takes two foundational divine names and loops them together. “I With You Am.”

God had been with God’s people from the very beginning. God had spoken this promise to Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah. God’s presence with the people is woven throughout the Old Testament, but now in Matthew the Divine is being expressed in a much more intimate way. Matthew’s Gospel wants to make it clear that at a particular time, place, way, and in the life of a particular person, God worked with humanity and all creation to save God’s people, and God did it by being “I With You Am,” “God with you, God with me, God with all.” God did it in a child named both “Save” and “God with us.” But why take the time and energy to name this baby twice? Walter Bruggeman believes it is because the person of Jesus called people to believe that he saves and that he is saving and that we are saved – not in an abrupt fundamentalist way of being saved but that we are safe and loved and cared for. To follow Jesus’ ways, to be a disciple means to know you are safe and loved and to live that way. Jesus calls people to trust that God is with us, that we are not alone even in the face of death and every kind of danger. It is why we hear the angels, the messengers of God, say again and again, “Do not be afraid,” and the Psalmist says, “I will fear no evil, for thou are with me.” And if God is with us, that means that we have a sure companion and resource to live healthy, loving, healing lives in this world.

Unfortunately, there are lots of people in the world and in the church who think that there is no saving power in their lives and so they must manage for themselves. And when we

manage for ourselves, we grow anxious and angry and greedy and hurtful. There are those who live as though God were not with us, as though we were alone in the world. And if we are alone in the world, we must have our own way, we must lash out at and blame others who don't agree with us, and we become a destructive force in our communities where people tend to downright resign, quit, retire or whatever you want to call it from being in our presence. There is a choice to be made at Christmas – do we believe there is something to the name, both names given to this child? We have to decide whether the angel is telling the truth or not, whether God is with us or as Yoda would say, “I With You Am,” or we are alone and on our own hook? We need to decide if there indeed is a saving presence among us or not? Many of us live as they we are unsafe and all alone. What we decide about the angel's words makes all the difference in the world on how we live.

I believe the angel has spoken the truth about Jesus, and therefore, the truth about us. We are safe because of the baby named, “Save.” We are not alone because of “I With You Am.” Christmas is not just a time for merriment, parties, and shopping. It is about a decision. It is about a decision to trust the gospel and live differently because we are disciples of this baby, this adult, this “Savior”, this “God with us.” And one more thing - as Christmas arrives, don't try to do too much, reserve some energy and space enough to be dazzled. The gift of Christmas contradicts everything we sense about our own lives. Our world feels “unsavable” and yet here comes the baby named “Save.” Our world and our lives often feel abandoned and yet here comes the baby named “God with us.” Be ready to have your sense of the world contradicted by this gift from God. Take some time to rest in the promises found within a name which is so much more than just a name so that you may be safe, whole, and grateful.