

December 13, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

The One Who Knows Our Names

Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

This is the third Sunday in Advent here at the National Presbyterian Church, and the theme that we have chosen for this Advent time in our life together is the title “Jesus Christ: The Only New Thing.” In 1955 Charles Malik, who was a professor of philosophy at American University of Beirut, and was the ambassador from Lebanon to the United Nations, was in Princeton and gave a speech to young pastors and seminary students at Princeton Seminary. One of the sentences in that speech is unforgettable. He said,

Never be ashamed of Jesus Christ or his gospel. It is the only new thing in the world. Everything else is as old as the hills, including the latest vaccine or the latest bomb.” [It’s interesting, in 1955 we were grateful for a new vaccine and also worried about a bomb, just as we are today.] Only the eternal, only that which is the same yesterday, today, and forever is really new. Aim therefore always at that which is at once eternal, universal, personal, concrete.¹

Today we want to talk about the fact that at Christmas time we're at the supremely personal moment in all of Christendom's time and history. Of all the yearnings God's people were looking forward to in the fulfillment of the Messiah, this personal moment is the supreme moment. Christmas is profoundly personal. This is the importance really of names and the role that names play in the birth narratives of our Lord. Today's text is one of those birth narratives. Matthew Chapter 1:18 begins this way:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah," [Messiah is his title. That's not his name; that's his title.] Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When His mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet." [And here the prophet Isaiah, Chapter 7 of Isaiah is quoted.] "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel which means God with us." When Joseph awoke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she'd borne a son and he named him Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25).

Jesus is a common Jewish name. It is the name Joshua. Moses' servant was Joshua. Names in the life of Israel play a very important role. The name Jesus literally means "savior." There are other great names in the history of God's people. Two of them are borrowed from other cultures. Abraham, the father of the Jews, has a Babylonian name "Abram" and that name has been found in Babylonian inscriptions, then it becomes Abraham, the father of God's people. And Moses, the other "grey-hair" of the Old Testament has an Egyptian name. Moses is an Egyptian name. For instance, one of the

pharaohs is Thutmose the Third; but this Mos becomes Moses.

And other names are very significant in the life of God's people. The first son of Abraham is Ishmael. Ishmael means "God hears." And the second son is Isaac and the name Isaac literally means "laughter," because Sarah laughed when she heard that she was pregnant and was to have a child. One of the names that's not so pleasant is the name Jacob; that name means "deceiver," because Jacob actually won his birthright by deception. So names play a big part throughout the history of God's people. And our Lord himself nicknamed some of the disciples. James and John were nicknamed Boanerges or "Sons of Thunder," which was an Aramaic name. The names are very important and play a role.

I want to reflect today especially on the name Emmanuel. Emmanuel means "God with us." This becomes a very important name for Jesus: God with us, God alongside of us. St. Paul will put it this way in his letter to the Philippians, he'll say, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice. Let all men know your patience. The Lord is nearby." And this is really Paul's reflection on Emmanuel. The Lord is nearby; he's alongside of us. Actually, probably the profoundest portrayal of Emmanuel from St. Paul is in his letter to the Ephesians in his prayer. He says this,

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. As you are being rooted and grounded in love, I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ. (Ephesians 3:14-18)

But notice that marvelous line, "that Christ will dwell in your hearts by faith." This is Emmanuel; this means, above all, that God is not just an idea.

The Gospel on Christmas morning is not a Christian theory, not a Christian principle, but a person, and a person that can be known, a person who will dwell in us.

Blaise Pascal was a French physicist and mathematician. He was a Christian too. He lived in the 17th century, he wrote thoughts down, and the thoughts were collected. Along with his provincial letters after his death at age 38 his sister, a Roman Catholic nun, collected the thoughts of Pascal, put them together in what has become a classic of Western literature, one of the great books of the Western world, *The Pensees*, the thoughts of Pascal. I think one of the unforgettable thoughts of Pascal speaks to this whole point. He says this, "The stoics say withdraw into yourself; that's where you will find peace, and that's not true. Others say go outside, look for happiness in some diversion, and that is not true. We may fall sick." That's an interesting almost humorous line. Diversion makes us sick. Then comes his great line, "Happiness is neither outside nor inside us. It is in God, who is both outside and inside us."²

Pascal is reflecting on the meaning of Emmanuel, that Jesus Christ will dwell in us as we invite him. He will dwell in our hearts by faith. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" is another way that St. Paul puts it. Well, what is Pascal getting at when he warns us not to go the stoic route? He says the stoics say withdraw into yourself and there you will find peace. Withdraw into ourselves. It's just a fact according to Pascal that it's too quiet in there, all by myself, to plunge into my own interior and just to live in myself is not peace. It may be quiet in there but that quietness should never be confused with peace. It shouldn't be called peace. So therefore you should be careful when you say, "All I want is a little quiet... or a little peace and quiet," but what you mean really is "quiet." I don't want all this noise around me. I just

want to plunge into myself where there are no distractions.

Charles Dickens knew this, and in *A Christmas Carol* his chief character is Ebenezer Scrooge. Ebenezer Scrooge is a very, very quiet man. He is the perfect example of a totally quiet man. He just does his accounting and then he goes home and stays in his house and when carolers come to the door, he won't open the door or let them in. He doesn't want them to sing to him. In fact, his famous line is "bah humbug" as he sends them away. He is a quiet man. But that is not peace. In fact, he's a man who has very bad nightmares. And at night this quiet man has terrifying dreams that of course become the big part of the story and actually play a good role in his life.

But Pascal is clear; don't withdraw into yourself. It's just a fact that it's too still there by yourself. It's not peace; it's too lonely. You will not find the answer to your life in yourself. Self-referential people who are totally focused on themselves are not going to find peace. They may have bad dreams. Then Pascal also takes on diversions. He says some say happiness is outside myself in diversions. Some say look for happiness in some diversion, and that is not true either. We may fall sick. Diversions and too many parties will make you sick. Sometimes too many diversions confuse you. The external decorations, the external events at the edges of things can sometimes be confused with the real thing. And so a diversion distracts and derails us from discovering the real thing that we are looking for.

I think Dr. Seuss' story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is a story about this kind of confusion. The Grinch lives up on the top of his mountain, and he sees a little village down below called Whoville, and he sees they're celebrating and getting ready to celebrate Christmas; it bothers him. But he makes a mistake, and Dr. Seuss sees this. He thinks that the trees and all of the decorations and the presents that everybody is buying for each other and the

food they're buying to get ready for their great feast, he thinks that that is the event that's happening. And so it dawns on him that if he could take his fake reindeer Max and go down there at night when they're not expecting it, and if he got all of these things and took them away, then it would quiet everything down and he would take away and steal their Christmas. And that's the title of his book, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Well, he does it.

With Max he goes down and he's a kind of reverse Santa Claus. He goes down the chimney just like Santa, but instead of bringing toys down the chimney he goes down the chimney and takes everything off the walls, all of the food out of the refrigerator, the roast beast and everything, and all of the decorations and the Christmas trees. And he pulls them up the chimney, puts them on his sleigh. It's a little bit improbable, but he gets everything on the sleigh with poor Max. He takes it all up to the top of his hill, and then an amazing thing happens. When he gets all these decorations and all of these things that he thought were what made Christmas what it was and he gets them up to his mountain and looks down on the village of Whoville, he sees that the folks of Whoville had formed a circle and they're singing carols and they're rejoicing and they have each other, there's love there. At that moment the Grinch discovers that Christmas is not the diversions that he saw; it's not the externals. There's something at the core of it that he missed. It's a happy story because he decides to give up his collection of all these things and go back down and join them, and actually join the people of Whoville for the heart of that celebration, discovering what it really is about.

What is it that gives us happiness at Christmas? The happiness of Christmas comes in God. Don't withdraw into yourself. Don't leap outward into diversions. But happiness is found in God who is both outside and inside of us. He's outside of us. That means he is not under our control. He comes

by surprise. He is the Lord. He is the Christ. In fact, that is the way he is introduced to Joseph: "For unto you will be born in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." That's the way the shepherds hear it from the angels. Joseph hears it; he's going to have this son who will be the Christ. His name is Jesus the Savior, and he is Emmanuel, the one who will be with us and will come inside of us. And that's the one we meet at Bethlehem. That's who the shepherds meet when the angel says to them, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of a great joy that shall come to all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 1:10-11). And then here's the sign, "You will find the baby," and they go to find the baby, but the angel sings a song to them first. And it's the first Christmas carol, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men" (Luke 2:14). This is the good decision that God has made toward humanity.

He has made that decision. He is going to come by surprise. He will find us. He knows how to find us too. You know, we have names. And when he finds us he doesn't say, "Hey, you." He knows our names. Even Saul who was an enemy of Christ, the Lord met him on the road to Damascus and didn't say, "Hey, you," there. He said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul discovered grace on the road to Damascus. He discovered that Jesus Christ knew his name. And he knows our names and he calls us by name. He knows us very well. He has a name too. And that's what we celebrate at this Christmas time.

Heavenly Father, thank you. Thank you for the names that Jesus has. His name Jesus, Savior; he's the one who is able to redeem. He's able to set us free from the things that have confused us. And thank you that this Jesus is Emmanuel, the one who comes alongside of us, the one who comes into our

lives. We think of that promise in Revelation, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in with him and eat with him and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). This promise of fellowship, this promise to come into our lives to make us whole, we thank you for that promise. We thank you that you know our names and we know your name too. Amen.

1 Malik, Charles. -- from the 1955 Commencement address, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey.

2 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensees*.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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