

"It's More Than DNA"

Advent 2020, "What Are We Waiting For?", part 4

Matthew 1:18-25

[SLIDE 1] *Words of welcome and thanks.*

Would you pray with me? Lord, if you have something to tell me this morning, I'm ready to listen. Look through me, test my heart, show me anything about myself I need to change, and show me your eternal way. Amen.

[SLIDE 2] As a dad, one of the funniest moments of my life was helping my wife pick out baby names. Mostly, I was thinking of boy's names. I'm sure you'd guess that my suggestions were mostly...OK, entirely...rejected. For instance, Oliver Ferdinand Falker – his initials would be OFF...that didn't make the cut. Neither did Owen Alfred Falker (OAF), Oscar Oakland Falker (OOF)...or any names starting with the letter O. I almost had Katja convinced we could name our son Lucas Alfred Falker, after my father-in-law, but she thought LAF was too ridiculous. Alas, my dream of having a child with pronounceable initials failed. Instead we have ESF, LWF, and JMF.

My joking aside, the process of naming children fascinates me. How many of you bear a name that runs in the family? We have lots of Howard's, William's and Max's in ours. And you know there are lots of dads out there naming their sons "Junior," with mixed results, like this. *(Clip from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade)*. Names: love them or hate them, they are one way parents leave a legacy for their child. No matter what we call our children, the act of naming is important.

[SLIDE 4] In my experience, parents usually have names picked out before their children are born. When the child comes into the world, you usually have the forms filled out by the time you leave the hospital, although, legally, you can wait up to one full year to actually file the birth certificate or change the child's name.

Waiting to name a child is the norm in other cultures: the naming comes well after the child was born. In Hinduism, a child is named on the 11th day after birth. The whole family gathers for the naming ceremony, and the priest passes the child to the paternal aunt. First, she whispers the newborn's name in the

child's ear, for the two of them alone to hear, then she announces it to those gathered.¹

[SLIDE 5] In Judaism, a boy is normally named on the 8th day, during the circumcision ritual. That gives the parents roughly a week to think about it. Therefore, we should find Joseph's command from the angel a little strange. "You will name the child 'Jesus'." (see Matt 1:21) Jesus' name was already picked out by the second trimester! Joseph would be the one to give the name to the child and proclaim it to the community.

The importance of naming cannot be understated. However, this morning I am more concerned with who does the naming than what the name is. In our scripture today, God told Joseph that he, Joseph, would get to announce Jesus' name to the world.

[SLIDE 6] Put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a moment, if you can. We don't know how old he was. I'm going to assume this morning that he was young, and this was his first marriage. He was waiting for his first chance to start a family. And then, before the wedding ever happened, he found out that Mary was pregnant.

[SLIDE 7] Try to imagine his disappointment, how his world might have come crashing down. The Bible says Joseph was a righteous man, a good man, and would not expose Mary, who by law would have been executed by stoning. In the culture of their time, their betrothal was something more than just an engagement, but not yet a marriage. It could legally only be broken by divorce. And since Mary was pregnant before they were actually married, Joseph couldn't even pretend that the child was his, even if he wanted to. No, Mary would have been killed for the sake of Joseph's integrity. And so Joseph was willing to bury his disappointment and simply divorce her quietly.

[SLIDE 8] And then, the angel tells Joseph in a dream, "Don't be afraid." What was Joseph afraid of? Shame, defeat, ridicule, perhaps. But the angel goes on to explain that this child is of the Holy Spirit. He says, "Joseph, Son of David, you will take Mary as your wife, and you will be the child's father. You will claim

¹ Wikipedia. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naming_ceremony)

your place in your son's life, and you will raise him and give him his name." (my paraphrase of Matt. 1:20-21)

[SLIDE 9] That phrase, "Joseph, Son of David" is the key. The angel says to Joseph, "Remember your name, your legacy, your heritage." Everyone knew the Messiah would come from the house of King David. The angel gets Joseph into the right mindset – "Joseph, remember who you are and to whom you belong, because what's coming next is going to blow your little carpenter's mind. Remember, Joseph, that you are a prince."

This direction from God, to let Joseph announce his son's name, has huge implications. The act of naming indicates authority over something, or better yet, responsibility for something. My daughter Emily once made a teddy bear and named it, "Stitches". When I was a child, I had a cow my grandmother made for me, and I named it, "Cow."

[SLIDE 10] To name something is to declare that the object or person matters to you, and you claim responsibility for him or her. Genesis 1&2 tell us that in the very beginning, God named the parts of creation: the day, the night, the sky, the land, the seas. But God left the naming of creatures to Adam. When Adam named the creatures in the garden, Adam became their steward. And in the same way, God told Joseph, "I'm trusting you to take responsibility for my son. It's more than DNA, Joseph. You have what it takes to be Jesus' earthly father. This is going to be the best adoption ever."

Personally, I'm glad God did this before Jesus was born. Can you imagine if this scene had taken place with Jesus as a young boy? Like this? (*Despicable Me clip*). I can just see Gabriel saying, "Jesus, this is Joseph. He's adopting you. And he's a carpenter!"

[SLIDE 12] The thing is, God knew that Jesus would need the support of his earthly father to shape his life and prepare him for ministry. It is through this act of letting Joseph name Jesus that God formed a permanent bond between child and father. And it is through Joseph's heritage that Jesus is a Son of David. Through Joseph the prophecy is fulfilled that one of King David's children would reign forever.

This is all well and good for Joseph, but what about us? So what that Joseph named Jesus and connected with him? What's that got to do with us?

Here's the deal. The same God who included Joseph as a part of God's family, wants to make you a part of God's family. Listen to these two scriptures:

[SLIDE 13] 2 Corinthians 6:18, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters." (NIV)

Romans 8:15-17, "You received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children, and if children, also heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ." (HCB)

God names us. God claims us. God adopts us. God gets us, literally.

[SLIDE 14] Joseph was chosen to be Christ's earthly father because Joseph reflected God's character. Before the angel came to speak to him, Joseph could have exposed Mary. I'm pretty sure he knew his Hebrew Bible. He knew the commandment in Deuteronomy 22:23-24 that a couple caught in adultery would be stoned. Yet Joseph was prepared to "forgive" Mary and do the right thing.

Do you see the connection? Joseph "forgave" Mary; and God forgives us! Joseph had compassion and would have done the right thing; God, in mercy and compassion, always does the right thing! Had Mary sinned, Joseph would have addressed the issue, but not ridiculed, ignored, or persecuted Mary. Does that sound familiar? In John 8, Jesus forgave a woman who had committed adultery, in one of greatest acts of compassion and mercy that Jesus ever showed. He learned it from his dad.

[SLIDE 15] In this Christmas story in Matthew 1, Joseph reflects God's character. Joseph claims Jesus. God claims us. Joseph adopts Jesus, giving him an earthly home and a family. So we know that God loves us and wants us in God's family! Moms, dads, sisters, brothers, sons, daughters: we are all connected through Christ when we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Creator of the universe adopts us!

This is a big deal. Today, I want you to know, without a doubt, that you can be adopted, too. The name "Jesus" means, "God saves." Lots of children were named Jesus, or Joshua, or Yeshua in those days. Many people thought that their child might be the one who delivered Israel from Roman oppression. They were looking for a political, religious hero. Instead, God said, "This problem is deeper

than politics and religion. People need to be saved from their sins. And my child, Jesus, is going to be the one to do it."

I want to give you a simple invitation this morning. Let God adopt you. Respond to the gospel, the good news, which is spelled out for you in six simple thoughts, each starting with a letter of the word, GOSPEL.²

[SLIDE 16] **G** – God loves you. God created you for his family. God desires a loving relationship with you.

[SLIDE 17] **O** – Our sins separate us from fully knowing and receiving that love. We are all sinful. I didn't have to be taught how to sin. My children didn't, either. It's part of who we are.

[SLIDE 18] **S** – Sins cannot be removed by good deeds. I wish I could say going to church, giving away your wealth, and trying to be a "good person" was enough to conquer our sin; they're not. There's only one way to remove our sin.

[SLIDE 19] **P** – Paying the price for our salvation, Jesus died and rose again. His blood on the cross was the only thing that could conquer our sin and redeem us.

[SLIDE 20] **E** – Everyone has the opportunity to be set free of sin, to receive Christ into their life and become his disciple. If you ask Christ to be your Savior, he will come into to your life and radically change it for good. Guaranteed.

[SLIDE 21] **L** – Life with Jesus starts the moment you say "Yes!" to him, and continues into eternity. Followers of Jesus have eternal life because he conquered death. This eternal life can be yours if you turn your life completely over to him.

This is the GOSPEL, your invitation to become a forgiven, adopted child of God. If you believe this with all your heart, if you confess and accept this invitation today, for the first time or the fiftieth time, let me tell you something: Congratulations, you're adopted! You are part of this great family with all of us who trust in Christ.

And the best part is, just like we can share the story of Christmas, we can share this gospel with everyone. God chooses us. God claims us. God makes us

² Based on Greg Stier's "The GOSPEL Journey," dare2share.org.

heirs to the incredible riches of heaven. That's not something to keep secret. Let's share the good news of what God did for us.

Memory Verse:

2 Corinthians 6:18 (NIV)

"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters."

Reflection Questions:

1. What possessions in your life have you named and claimed as your own?
2. Why do you think God chose Joseph to be Jesus' earthly father?
3. What decisions do we face in life that required both justice and mercy?
4. What challenges do you think the holy family faced because of the virgin birth?
5. When have you felt that you were claimed by God?
6. Who in your life needs to hear the Christmas story of God adopting us?