

**Lenten Luncheon Reflections 2009**  
**The Name of Jesus**  
**Tuesday, March 3, 2009**

**Prayer:**

We thank you, Gracious God, for this season of the year when we can pause again to think about Jesus and about the great love which you have shown for us and for the whole world in him. As we think about all of the names and titles which have been given to Jesus in the Bible and down through the years so we pray that our appreciation of who he is and all that you have done for us in him will grow and deepen so that as we share Lent together this year all of us may be drawn closer to yourself and grow in our appreciation of all that you have done for us in him, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Those of you who have seen our last newsletter or our bulletin for last Sunday will have seen that our theme for Lent this year is that of looking at some of the names and titles of Jesus, of seeing how they help us to relate to him, and of how they guide us to live as those who bear his name today. The poster that we will have before us throughout Lent reminds us that there are far more names and titles for Jesus than we could possibly cover in a six week period. Even the list on this poster is not exhaustive. There are more than 700 names and titles for Jesus that people have identified in the Bible. We will then have to be selective. In the newsletter you will have seen the names and titles on which I will be centering our attention at our Worship Services and at these Lenten luncheons. During the Easter Season at our Worship Services we will continue to think about some of these titles as we focus on the "I am Sayings" found in John's Gospel. In addition, of course, we will be using hymns and anthems that make reference to various names or the titles of Jesus.

Today I would like to invite us to sing part of what is going to be one of our theme hymns for Lent this year, the hymn, “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds.” The hymn was written by John Newton whose more famous hymn is, of course, “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.” This hymn reminds us that that amazing grace of God has been seen most clearly in Jesus Christ. There are in most hymnbooks a selection of the seven or eight verses of Newton’s original hymn. Like the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” the hymn reflects again on his own experience. Just before his death he said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner and that Jesus is a great Saviour.” (The Baptist Hymn Book Companion, page 190. London: Psalms and Hymns Trust 1962). Today we will join with John Newton in remembering God’s answer to our sin in Jesus our great Savior as we sing stanzas 1 and 3 of his hymn.

In his book, “The Names of Jesus,” Elmer Towns suggests, “Of the more than 700 names and titles of the Lord Jesus Christ in Scripture, none is perhaps more venerated by Christians than the name ‘Jesus’ itself.” (The Names of Jesus, page 15. Accent Publications 1987).

Some of you I know will remember that on January 1, 2006 I preached a sermon in which I suggested that I was not sure how many people would be comfortable calling their sons, Jesus. If you don’t remember the exact date on which I preached this sermon or even all that I said, please do not worry I had to look it up myself! The thing that stood out for me from that sermon was the way in which several people afterwards reminded me that while in much of the English speaking world there may be a reluctance to give children the name Jesus the same was not true in the Hispanic speaking world where many parents are very proud to name their eldest son after the name, Jesus.

What may be our reluctance now to give children the name of Jesus was not the case when Jesus himself was born. To have heard Mary and Joseph call their baby, “Jesus,” would not have sounded strange to their family and their friends and

neighbors. The name, “Jesus,” was a common name in first-century Palestine. It has been found on various grave markers and tombs in and around Jerusalem. In Matthew’s Gospel chapter 27 at the trial of Jesus before Pilate we read, “Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, “Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” (Matthew 27:15-17) We are here celebrating Lent because we all know the rest of the story and the choice that the people made of Jesus Barabbas.

The fact that Jesus was such a common name means that in the Gospels Jesus is often referred to as Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Son of Joseph, or Jesus the Nazarene. Later on, of course, particularly in Acts and in the New Testament letters, he is referred to as “Jesus Christ,” as though Christ was his surname or last name. As we shall see, though, in a few week’s time such a name is more of a title than a name. What is interesting to note is that in the Egyptian papyri the name, “Jesus” occurs frequently right through the early part of the second century. Then abruptly, both Jews and Christians seemed to stop using the name, “Jesus,” for their boys. The Jews did so because the name had become so closely related to Christianity which they so rigorously opposed and hated. Christians, of course, stopped using the name Jesus for the opposite reason. For them, as for so many today, the name was special and held in veneration. It was almost thought to be sacrilegious that anyone but Jesus should bear that name.

While the name Jesus was a common name at the time of his birth what is clear from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is that such a name was not given to him just because Mary or Joseph thought it sounded nice. I would invite you to share with me in reading what we find in Luke’s Gospel: (Luke 1:26-38)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, [27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house

of David. The virgin's name was Mary. [28] And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." [29] But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. [30] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. [31] And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. [32] He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. [33] He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." [34] Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" [35] The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. [36] And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God." [38] Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

In these words, of course, we find not only the name of Jesus but many of the other names and titles which we associate with him. What is very clear here, though, is that giving this child the name of Jesus was not Mary's idea, but God's. In fact it was not Mary's idea to have a baby in the first place, but also God's idea. As the news of her pregnancy becomes known we can only imagine how hard it was for Joseph to deal with the news. It would appear that in order to help him in the midst of his confusion that God sent another angel. This angel also makes clear in case Mary may have forgotten in all of the surprise of Gabriel's announcement what name should be given to this child. I would invite you to read with me what Matthew tells us of Joseph's experience: (Matthew 1:18-25)

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. [19] Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. [20] 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. [21] She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." [22] All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: [23] "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." [24] When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, [25] but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Here again we see not only the name Jesus, but also at least one other title, that of Emmanuel, that we associate with him. Again it is made clear that it is God's intention that the child should be called Jesus. What is interesting in these words is that they read, "You are to name him Jesus." It was as he was ready and encouraged to give the child that name that by implication Joseph was accepting this Son of God of miraculous conception as his own. After his birth Matthew affirms in obedience to the words of the angel that this is precisely what Joseph does as he says, "and he named him Jesus."

The name Jesus is so familiar to us today that we so often fail to appreciate the appropriateness of this name. The name in Hebrew would have been, "*Yeshua*" which is itself a contraction of the Hebrew name, *Yehoshua* which is translated as Joshua in our English Bibles. The name Joshua means, "Yahweh or God is help," or "Yahweh or God is salvation." The name Joshua, of course, is most familiar to us from the way in which he succeeded Moses as the leader of the people of Israel and led them safely into the Promised Land of Canaan. His

original name was “Hoshea,” which means, “salvation.” It was Moses who changed his name to “Jehoshua” or “Joshua” probably when he sent him to spy out the land for the people of Israel. (Numbers 13:16).

The name, Jesus, or Joshua, “God is Salvation,” is, of course, most appropriate for the one who brought to this earth God’s ultimate salvation. Indeed one writer has suggested that unlike so many here who have done so, Jesus did not need to read Rick Warren’s best-selling book, “The Purpose Driven Life,” with its subtitle question, “What on Earth am I Here for?” Anne Spangler suggested that, “the most purpose-driven person in history may not have needed to pose the question at all because his purpose was announced before his birth. (*Praying the Names of Jesus* by Anne Spangler, pages 241-242. Zondervan 2006) In Matthew we see that purpose being associated with his name as we read, “and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” The very name of Jesus implies his role as Savior. At his birth the angels may not have used the name, “Jesus,” but they announced to the shepherds what his name implied when they said, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

John Newton has reminded us that the name of Jesus is sweet to those of us who believe in him because like Newton, whether or not our memory is failing, we all need to remember however great our sin may be Jesus is an even greater Savior. Lent traditionally has been the Season of the Christian Year that has been the season of penitence, a time for looking again at our lives and for acknowledging our sin and our failure to be all of the people God created us to be. Such self-inspection can be rather daunting and very depressing. Indeed it would be something that we would not even want to attempt without knowing God’s gift of Jesus to be our Savior. As we think about the name of Jesus this Lent we are invited to think what does it mean to me that he is the one who was given this

name because he will save his people from their sins? As we claim that forgiveness and salvation that he offers to us, of course, the other question that comes to us is how am I showing that I am a follower of Jesus? Do I show by my words and actions that I am seeking to be as forgiving to other people as Jesus has been to me?

As you reflect on these questions I would invite you to sing some other words about the name of Jesus as found on the sheet. We will sing twice the chorus, "Jesus, Name Above All Names."

If you have hymns or choruses about the name of Jesus you would like for us to sing here or at worship services doing Lent please let me know.

This coming Sunday we will be thinking about Jesus as the Holy One of God who taught with authority. We will follow this next Tuesday by thinking about what it means to call Jesus, Rabbi or Teacher.

### **Closing Prayer:**

Gracious God, we thank you that you have given us your Son and that you have called him, Jesus, because he came to bring us your salvation as he saves us from our sin. For all that it means to us to be able to look at our sin and our failure knowing that we have such a great Savior, we give you praise and thanks in his name. Amen.