

St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Sermon for Dec. 1, 2019, Advent 1
Isa. 64: 1-9; Matt. 16: 13-24
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, and let us hear your voice in these words. Amen.

The Power of a Name

It's beginning to look a lot like Advent around here. Poor Advent—those four Sundays squeezed between Thanksgiving and Christmas and assaulted by commercialism when really all it wants us to do is to reflect on the “Reason for the Season” by preparing our hearts for Christ. Is that asking too much? Apparently so, if our current observance of it is any indication. How can the season of Advent, first established in the medieval church around 600 AD, possibly compete with stores like Tiffany's that have gotten on the Advent Calendar bandwagon?

Everyone knows what an Advent Calendar is, right? It's a visual way to count down the 24 days before Christmas with, hopefully, some thought about Christ. But Tiffany's has really gotten into the spirit of the season by offering a very unique calendar, one that costs a mere \$112,000. Within each little compartment is a blue box holding a signature gift: a full-size sterling silver cup, an 18k gold Tiffany T True bracelet, an 18k rose gold Tiffany Smile pendant with diamonds, and 21 other ridiculously expensive items which all cry out, “Christ is coming!” Not. Of everything I've come across that proves that observing Advent as it was originally intended is counter-cultural, then Tiffany's Advent Calendar is it.

What then do we, as people called to be in the world but not of it, do with Advent, a time set apart for us to remember the miracle of Christ's first coming and prepare for his second? We are invited to “practice” it by taking some time out of the buying and bustling of the holidays in an effort to make them holy days by spending some extra time with Christ. We are invited to consider what his birth means to us beyond singing our favorite carols at church and gathering with family, all important but all fleeting? How are we living our lives in preparation for Christ's second coming? What personal gift will we lay before the manger on Christmas Day? The sacred time of Advent offers us the opportunity to ponder these questions just like Mary pondered the shepherds' words when they worshipped her newborn child. One way we might do that is to consider the many names of Christ and what they reveal about him and about us.

Names are fascinating. They remind us of who we are and whose we are. Consider the story of your own name, or your child's name. Often, our names link us to people who came before us. Names contain memories, names carry hope, and names even embody expectations.

The Jewish people of the Old Testament certainly revered the name of God. In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet had a need for God to “come down” and “make his *name* known” to all the nations so that they would tremble and return to God. The Israelites believed in the power of the name of their God, the Lord, the one who had named them his chosen people. Upon returning from bondage in Babylon and trying to rebuild Jerusalem, God’s people now desperately needed help. So, the prophet Isaiah gave God another name: potter. Isaiah understood that the people were in trouble because they had failed to live into their part of the covenant and to follow God’s teaching, forgetting who and whose they were. They needed something--to be reshaped, reformed, molded like “clay.” Potter and clay. Names and relationships and expectations. Certainly, that is the case for Simon and Jesus in this morning’s gospel lesson where much naming happens.

Well into his ministry in Luke’s gospel, Jesus asks his closest friends who people are saying he is. And here comes the list of names: Jesus is John the Baptist; Jesus is Elijah; Jesus is Jeremiah. Jesus is whoever these people expect and want him to be. But then Jesus directly asks Simon who Simon says he is, and Simon replies, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Messiah is a title that means “anointed one,” the Greek version (*christo*) of the Hebrew word “*mashiach*.” Christ is not Jesus’ last name; it is his title as the “anointed one” and refers to the ancient practice of anointing priests, prophets, and kings with oil. Simon’s naming Jesus as the Messiah reflects Simon’s expectations, the same that the Jews of Jesus’ day had. They eagerly anticipated a specific prophesied figure referred to in thirty-nine Old Testament scripture passages as the Messiah, a great earthly king of the lineage of David who, by the power of God, would restore Israel and rule the world. Simon had been taught to expect that kind of anointed one because the people believed they needed that kind of human messiah. That is why he so forcefully objects to Jesus’ prediction of suffering and death. Simon’s expectations for the name Messiah don’t match the Messiah who was anointed with oil by a woman in tears just days before his crucifixion. This Messiah does not defeat the Roman Empire or take on an earthly position of power but does something greater; this Messiah answers the prophet’s plea to “come down” and reveal God’s love for us. This name turns expectations upside down.

The question Jesus asks of Simon in today’s gospel is the same question Jesus asks of each one of us this Advent: “Who do *you* say that I am?” Jesus wants to know what our expectations are; what we want from him; and how the name we use for him defines who we are and whose we are. If we call Jesus our Messiah, our anointed one, what does that mean to us? If we are his followers, are we challenged or changed by knowing that this Messiah gave up a heavenly kingdom for an earthly outpost, that this Messiah, instead of pitching his tent among soldiers going to war, or pitching it up in the starry heavens light years away, pitched it right among us?

Simon calls Jesus Messiah, and when he does, he is invited by Jesus to deny himself and take up a cross. Simon will be a different type of soldier, a self-sacrificing soldier, and so he, too, is given a different name: Peter, the rock upon whom Jesus will build his church. Peter, the one who will deny he even knows Jesus, the one who is missing from the foot of the cross at Jesus' crucifixion, but the one who through grace becomes an example of how we are to feed the anointed one's sheep.

God himself revealed this naming-power at Creation, naming sky, light, dark, man, woman, and so calling them into existence. While all was good, God named man and woman "very good," made in God's own image. Then God shared that naming-power with Adam, allowing Adam to name the animals as an act of ownership and possession. Naming others can also shape their identities as God did when God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Jacob's name to Israel, creating new covenants. When Simon became Peter and Saul became Paul, their names led to new missions. We the church "give name" to the one being baptized when we welcome that person into the "Christian" family as a "child of God." Names are powerful.

What name do you usually use for Jesus? Lord? Christ? Savior? Teacher? Friend? Messiah? What does that name say about who you are and who Jesus is? When we use these names in times of prayer or reflection or desperation or need or worship, do they really mean anything to us or have they become so routine, "Dear Jesus," that we don't even consider to whom we are speaking? Names are important. Names have power.

Advent can be an intentional time, a counter-cultural time, to reflect on what we call our Lord (another name) and how that name influences our relationship with him. Exploring the many names of Jesus might also help us see him in a new and different way and so grow closer to him because Jesus, a name which means "God of Salvation," wants to be closer to us.

This Advent of 2019, two millennia after Peter made his eager and hopeful proclamation, we are invited to anticipate anew the arrival of the Messiah in our own lives. Poet, theologian, and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner wrote, "The extraordinary thing about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens." We are encouraged to wake up and realize that we are in the midst of Jesus' arrival even as we await a second coming, and a third one, and a fourth or fifth one that happens whenever we call his name and open our hearts to his presence. Jesus Christ was, is, and ever shall be.

He has been called many things. "Who do you say Jesus is?"

Amen.