

And They Named Him Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

Richard C. Allen

December 19, 2010

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

I'm glad when parents fuss over what they're going to name their child, struggle with it a bit, consider a range of names, and then settle on the one name that fits. There's something sacred about the selection of a name. It's very satisfying to me, for example, that my middle name is Clarke, my grandfather Clemmer's first name. We gave that same middle name to our oldest child, and he and his wife assigned it to their first child. Clarke...this name is like a hand reaching back into history and forward to the next generation, connecting me with ones I love.

Mary and Joseph are instructed by an angel what name to give their child, but I imagine they went through some of the same machinations other parents go through. They may have thought of something simple such as Joe Junior or something more complex such as Methuselah. The name, Jesus, announced by the angel, is the same name as the Hebrew name, Joshua. Both mean 'savior' or 'one who saves people from their sins.'

Ask 100 people to define Savior and you get 300 different answers. My reading of the Gospel tells me that a Savior is one who knows how to orchestrate a blessed release from the spiritual burden we commonly call guilt. A Savior is one who recognizes agony when she sees it and moves boldly to release the bearer of that agony. A Savior releases us in such a way that we are filled with gratitude, maybe dance a spontaneous jig, maybe run all the way to the church and light a candle, maybe choose to become a more forgiving person, ourselves. In our Christian story, Jesus is the one who does this work of setting people free.

As a boy, I used to love watching the western movies with Roy Rogers or Jingles P. Jones or the Cisco Kid. Inevitably, there would be a scene with someone in the local jail. And I'd sort of feel bad for the one behind bars, would sort of hope he'd figure a way out. And then one of two things would happen. A woman would come with a basket with a hot supper including a cake with a hacksaw buried inside. Or, lying upon the cot, the prisoner would stare up at the ceiling and see encoded language instructions for removing the cell door from its hinges. And in the next scene, the prisoner would be riding his horse out of town, free at last!

This is the role of the Savior in our spiritual lives, to release us from those powers that hold us back from living abundantly! The woman with the hacksaw is a savior figure. The coded language on the ceiling is savior language. In our Christian faith, Jesus is the Savior. He is the one who sees our predicament, who sees that we are not free to love fully, who sees that we are crippled by some failure, who sees that we are compromised by some dark secret, some fear. He is the one who swings wide open the door to grace, the door to forgiveness, the door to true freedom.

It's as if his birth in Bethlehem is like a Glastonbury High School cheerleader with a megaphone, broadcasting loud enough so the person on the highest plank in the bleachers will hear and believe. The cheerleader is shouting **YOU ARE FORGIVEN. I MEAN IT! CARRY YOUR NEGATIVE BAGGAGE NOT ONE MORE DAY!**

The details of the Christmas story, of course, are intriguing and imaginative and endure in our hearts and minds. But the real significance of the details is that they point to our belief: Jesus Christ came to set us free; free to love without condition; free to live abundantly; free to be servants in the service of the whole human family; free to look ourselves in the mirror and see a face that God has made, a face that God treasures, a face that makes God smile.

So, Christmas is a season for rejoicing! We rejoice that a Savior has come in order that we might have access to the abundance of life God has intended since the Garden of Eden.

This is what I wanted to say to the church on this Christmas Sunday, in the greatest of hope. Amen!