

## So, What's in a Name?

SERMON TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25

*Dearly beloved of God, our sermon's text is taken from St. Matthew's Gospel. Let us pray...*

*O Heavenly Father, we come before you this evening in the name of Your anointed Son, Jesus, through whom, by Your good will, we know peace with You in heaven while we walk this world sealed with Your Spirit, He who keeps us through Your Gospel as we hear Your message to us throughout all our days. Guard our hearts, we pray, by Your abiding presence and promise. Amen.*

“Happy holidays!” That’s become the new greeting for the season. Gone, it seems, is the reference to Christmas (or, at least, that’s become the goal). If any reference to Christmas yet remains, it is, in effect, to point to the secularized successor of what was once in the realm of the sacred. Holidays are no longer “holy days”. After all, it would be politically incorrect to single out any particular religious festival in a pluralistic society that people of many faiths (such as Muslims, Jews, and Hindus), or people of no particular faith at all, call home. Rather than ring the bells that identify this coming Christmas as a Christian holiday season, isn’t it better to be more inclusive so that the festivities might resonate with everyone? This is what the secular world would have us do with our sacred ways. This is what Christians rail against each year as they rightly recognize our secular

society's efforts to rip out the very sacred heart of the Christmas message so as to turn the season into a soulless shell of pleasant, yet powerless, platitudes.

“Jesus is the reason for the season!” is the common refrain with which many Christians respond in reaction against such efforts within our society. Still, the secular move to strip Christmas of its sacred meaning marches on, and on, and on to the beat of a different drum (with the *pa-rum-pa-pum-pum* of The Little Drummer Boy quickly being replaced by modern Christ-less “Christmas” cartoons for the little children). Even one of our most popular symbols of the season, the Christmas tree, has become a source of controversy as it has come to be called a “holiday tree” through legislation put forth by various levels of government. The Christmas tree is, of course, a symbol which points Christians to recall: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil by which, through Adam and Eve's partaking, mankind fell; the tree upon which our Lord Christ Jesus was crucified; and the “tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (which we will have access to because of what God has done for us in Christ). The Christmas tree, according to legend, was introduced into the Christmas tradition by our own dear Rev. Dr. Martin Luther; and therefore, as Christians *and* as Lutherans, it should cause us some concern when this symbol is co-opted by a secular society that strips it of its significance. Indeed, Christians throughout all the various denominations have become concerned that Christ is being crossed out, “X”-ed out, of Christmas. Now, as an aside, I should point out that the “X” in “X-mas” is not an attack upon

the title “Christ”, but rather it’s an abbreviation for Christ using the Greek letter *Chi*, which is the first letter in the Greek spelling of “Christ”. Still, what Christians are feeling is not unwarranted as the attempt to appropriate our holy day and empty it of its meaning is very real. The wiles of Satan are sometimes subtle. So, what’s in a name? Sometimes, everything.

A song you’ll hear often this time of year, especially as you walk through the malls where it’s continually piped in through their PA system, is *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, usually sung by Bing Crosby. This song, which was written by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane, captures well the problem that is present within the secular substitute that our society through its department-store Santas is selling. In the midst of sleigh bells ringing while dashing through the snow in search of some “Norman Rockwell”-like scene of family and friends gathered around a festive table making the “Yuletide gay”, we hear the hollow words, “From now on our troubles will be out of sight... our troubles will be miles away...” The song proclaims that the “olden days, the happy golden days” are with us as “faithful friends who are dear to us gather near to us once more.” Of course, it does add the condition that “we all will be together if the fates allow.” Herein, we see the problem. For many people, the “fates” have not been kind. Troubles are not out of sight, miles away.

For many people, the holiday season— especially if it is *only* about friends and family gathering together, about general sentiments of peace and goodwill

towards one another— can serve as a source of depression. It is a time when they are reminded of those who're not present at the table. I know this to be the case myself as my father and mother are no longer with us. However, what sustains me is not the secular substitute, but rather the sacred significance of the season which is contained in the name Christmas. For me, as for many, it's difficult to be gay in this world— in the original sense of the word— during the darkness of the winter months when the snow shrouds the cold earth like a white pall over all the greenery that has gone to sleep. Many people cannot manufacture feelings of joy just because it's "that time of year" to so do. You can manufacture toys and trinkets, bobbles and gift baskets, but not feelings... no matter how often you deck the halls with boughs of holly, don your gay apparel (again, in the original sense), or go dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh. Secular songs can only carry you for so long, food for feasting can only take you so far, and tinsel can only do so much. Secular "Christmas" songs are ultimately like cars without engines. They won't take you very far when the journey is all uphill.

Sacred Christmas hymns, on the other hand, are to be likened to the engines within cars which enable them to carry us along the way. This is because they point to the very heart of the Christmas story: Jesus, our Lord. Jesus, is the very lifeblood of the season as His story pulses through our being at the Church's retelling each and every year. The often heard refrain, "Jesus is the reason for the season!" points us to the ember of truth that not only warms our hearts but sets our

souls afire! Indeed, if I may, let me alter the refrain for a moment: “You are the reason for the season!” Yes, “*You* are the reason for the season!” This is the message of the season. This is the message of our sacred text.

Throughout the Scriptures, God has revealed Himself through His names such that God’s people were given insight into who God *is* and what He has done or is about to do. Our passage from St. Matthew is no different for it speaks of what God would provide through the birth of a child to Mary, the blessed Virgin. God would give, to the world which He so loves, His only Son. His name is Jesus. So, what’s in a name? Sometimes, everything. “You shall call His name ‘Jesus’, for He will save His people from their sins,” was the message conveyed to Joseph via God’s angel in a dream. ‘Jesus’, Yeshua in the Hebrew, literally means “the LORD’s Salvation”; and therefore, what Joseph heard was, “You shall call His name ‘the LORD’s Salvation’, for He will save His people from their sins.” So, what’s in a name? In this case, everything. You and I are the reason for the season because He came to save us from our sins. The cradle is the necessary condition for the work of the cross. It is the manifestation of God’s promise as He comes to us in the flesh to redeem our flesh and spare our souls. Here too we hear of another name of promise: Emmanuel. This name was spoken of by Isaiah, the prophet, to King Ahaz as part of sign that God was with His people, Israel, at a time of great distress. Isaiah’s prophetic utterance was both for his day and for the day in which the Virgin, while literally remaining a virgin, conceived and brought

forth God's Son, our Saviour— God literally “with us”, enfleshed as one of us so as to save all of us! This is the message for which there is no secular substitute. This is why we gather as a family, as His Church, so as to commemorate and celebrate His mighty works. This is why this season of Advent and its consummation at Christmas is considered to be holy. This is where we find our peace and joy because it is in Jesus that God has made peace with this world, through His Son's blood, as the ultimate act of good will toward sinners such as us. We cannot take “Christ” out of Christmas for, as it is written, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” We also ought not drop the “mass” out of Christmas, because this very Jesus— His very body and blood— are given to us to receive by means of His Holy Sacrament at His altar, *His* festal holy day's table, for our forgiveness. In receiving God's gift of His Son, Jesus Christ— His Son's very body and blood— we receive the gift of salvation. We know peace with God in accord with His good will. We know “the LORD's Salvation”. We know Jesus, the Christ. So, what's in a name? In this name is everything we need in this world and in the world to come. So, in one accord with the last of this season's O Antiphons, our hearts sing: “O come, Emmanuel!” O come, O come, Emmanuel, ‘God *with* us’! So, St. Matthew's Gospel concludes, “And Jesus came and said to them... ‘And behold, *I am with you* always, even unto the end of the age.’” So, in His name: AMEN.