

“What’s in a Name?”

Isaiah 9:6-7; Revelation 19:11-16 ¹

Jill and I moved to Ft. Worth, Texas to begin seminary in December of 1975—almost exactly forty years ago. It was winter, and Nathan was only six months old, so it was important that we get utilities established and get the heat on in the house we were renting.

I ran into a most unexpected problem when I discovered that there was already a David C. Stancil in Ft. Worth—he had a different middle name, but the same initial—and this David Stancil was a scoundrel. There’s more to the story than this, but the gas company wouldn’t turn on the gas to the house until I personally came to their main office downtown and established to their satisfaction that I was not this other David Stancil.

In a similar way, there are two former NBA stars named Eddie Johnson. One of them is an upstanding citizen, the other a scoundrel. After a similar mix-up, the upstanding Eddie said, “My name is everything. I don’t fault the other Eddie Johnson for having that name. I think it’s a great name. He just doesn’t happen to be a great guy.”²

On the flip side of such matters, when Gospel singers Bill and Gloria Gaither were newlyweds, they were school teachers in Alexandria, Indiana, where Bill had grown up. After looking for a while for some land on which to build a house, they picked out an area that belonged to a retired banker in town named Mr. Yule. The problem was that Mr. Yule had made it clear around town that he wasn’t about to sell any of his land—so don’t ask.

Bill screwed up his courage and went to see Mr. Yule anyway. After the expected initial refusal, Bill responded, “I know, but we teach school here, and thought maybe you’d be willing to sell land to someone planning to settle in the area.”

“He pursed his lips and stared at me,” Bill said. “What’d you say your name was?”

“Gaither. Bill Gaither.”

“Hmm. Any relation to Grover Gaither?”

“Yes, sir. He was my grandfather.”

Mr. Yule put down his paper and took off his glasses. “Interesting. Grover Gaither was the best worker I ever had on my farm. Full day’s work for a day’s pay. So honest. What’d you say you wanted?”

Mr. Yule sold the Gaithers fifteen acres for a third of their worth, because of the value of a good name. As the Bible says, “*A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold*” (Proverbs 22:1).

What’s in a name, after all? From biblical times right down to today, a good name has indeed been more desirable than great riches, and to have one’s name or reputation damaged is to suffer great loss indeed.

Our names symbolize who we are. They distill and crystallize our character into just a word or two that others perceive as either a sweet smell or a stench. Changing one’s name, then, is a very significant decision.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 29, 2015.

² Eddie Pells, Associated Press article in the *Houston Chronicle*, August 11, 2006.

There are several famous name changes in the Bible. God changed Abram's name, which means "Exalted Father," to "Abraham," which means "Father of Many." God changed Sarai's name to "Sarah," both of which mean "Princess." And God changed Jacob's name, which means "Deceiver," to "Israel," which means "One who struggles with God."

Two other famous name changes in the Bible are Jesus' change of "Simon," which means "Flat-Nosed," to "Peter," which means "Rock," and Saul's change of his Jewish name, which means "Asked For," to the Roman name "Paul," which means "Small," as he began his first missionary journey, in order to lift up the Name of Jesus (Acts 13:9). This morning, as we begin our Advent Journey, I want to focus for a little while on the names of God.

The famous evangelist, Billy Sunday, once said, "There are two hundred and fifty-six names given in the Bible for the Lord Jesus Christ, and I suppose this was because He was infinitely beyond all that any one name could express."³ I haven't tried to count all the names, but it's not hard to be overwhelmed as we try to grasp the greatness of God as represented by God's many Names. One mom was explaining some of the many names of God to her four year-old son, who, after listening to her long explanation, asked, "Can I just call him Steve?"⁴

As a Hebrew couple named their child, they symbolized their hope for the character and future of that boy or girl—just as we do—and, in Isaiah 9:6-7, God gave several names to the coming Messiah. He would be called "Wonderful Counselor," "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," and "Prince of Peace." These royal titles were not merely hopes, though they certainly represented hope for the people of Israel. These titles were realities guaranteed by God's own Word and Character!

Beyond His titles, the Messiah's personal Name was given to Joseph and Mary long before His birth, symbolizing what God would do through Him: "*You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21). As you probably know, the name, "Jesus," is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, "Joshua," and it means "Yahweh is salvation." "YHWH" is God's own personal Name, a name so holy that the Jews would not—and still will not—pronounce it. By giving His own personal Name to the coming child, the Father gave the sign that this child would bear God's own likeness and Spirit—a hint at the mystery of the Trinity.

Immediately after recording the angel's message about Jesus' name, Matthew went on to say, "*All of this happened to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:*

*Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son,
And he will be called Immanuel (meaning, God is with us)"* (Matthew 1:22-23).

³ Billy Sunday in the sermon, "Wonderful," quoted in "The Real Billy Sunday," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 2. Here are some of those names: **A Consuming Fire** (Deuteronomy 4:24), **A Great High Priest** (Hebrews 4:14), **A Sure Foundation** (Isaiah 28:16), **Bread of Life** (John 6:35), **Comforter in sorrow** (Jeremiah 8:18), **Defender of Widows** (Psalm 68:5), **Faithful & True** (Revelation 19:11), **God Almighty** (Genesis 17:1), **God of all comfort** (2 Corinthians 1:3), **God who avenges me** (Psalm 18:47), **God who saves me** (Psalm 51:14), **Good Teacher** (Mark 10:17), **Head of the church** (Ephesians 5:23), **Holy One among you** (Hosea 11:9), **Jealous** (Exodus 34:14), **King of Kings** (1 Timothy 6:15), **Light of Life** (John 8:12), **Lord of Lords** (1 Timothy 6:15), **Lord of the Harvest** (Matthew 9:38), **Mediator** (1 Timothy 2:5), **My Advocate** (Job 16:19), **My Confidence** (Psalm 71:5), **My Friend** (Job 16:20), **My Hiding Place** (Psalm 32:7), **My Hope** (Psalm 71:5), **My Redeemer** (Psalm 19:14), **My Salvation** (Exodus 15:2), **My Savior** (Psalm 42:5), **My Strong Deliverer** (Psalm 140:7), **My Stronghold** (Psalm 18:2), **My Support** (2 Samuel 22:19), **Our Father** (Isaiah 64:8), **Our Guide** (Psalm 48:14), **Our Help** (Psalm 33:20), **Our Leader** (2 Chronicles 13:12), **Our Peace** (Ephesians 2:14), **Prince of Peace** (Isaiah 9:6), **Refuge & Strength** (Psalm 46:1), **Righteous Judge** (2 Timothy 4:8), **Sovereign Lord** (Luke 2:29), **The Good Shepherd** (John 10:11), **The Most Holy** (Daniel 9:24), **Wonderful Counselor** (Isaiah 9:6), **Your Life** (Colossians 3:4).

⁴ Vicki Crooks, "Kids of the Kingdom," *Christian Reader*.

Immanuel! God is with us! What a word of Hope for our hearts in this jaded age! We live in a time when humans have sent spacecraft to the very edge of our solar system, and beyond, and in which huge orbiting telescopes peer to the farthest corners of the universe, very nearly to the beginning of time.

We also live in times in which Soviet cosmonauts search the heavens and conclude that they see no God; and in which many of us are familiar with what philosopher Blaise Pascal meant when he said, “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.” So what is it of which we are afraid? I think we’re afraid of being alone, because before we come to know God by the name *Immanuel*, God with us, we perceive ourselves to be completely alone in the vastness of this universe.

The college course that affected me more than any other was “existentialism,” and thoroughgoing existentialists are driven to conclude that the universe is “cosmically indifferent” to us and to the cries of our hearts.⁵

The cover of the current issue of *The Atlantic* highlights the high number of suicides among the wealthiest high school students in Silicon Valley, and the violence that swirls darkly through our cities and around our world speaks eloquently about the despair that pervades our planet. Whether we admit it to ourselves or not, the truth of the matter is that the realities of life are more than any of us can bear alone.

There are many among us these days who have concluded that, if there ever *was* a Creator, He seems to be no longer around or involved with us on this tiny planet as we hurtle around a middle-aged and fairly insignificant sun. We are ALONE, like a lost child in a storm, like a raft in a hurricane, like an orbiter lost in space.

And over against all this despair stands the Good News of Advent. The Good News of Advent, the Good News of the Gospel, is that **God has not left us alone**. Not only is Jesus “*Immanuel, God with us*” (Matthew 1:23), but this same Immanuel has promised, “*And be sure of this, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20).

Isaiah called this Immanuel our “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” and “Prince of Peace.” Each of these is worthy of much thought—and gratitude—but I’d like to focus this morning just on the last one.

Isaiah said that the Coming One would be called the Prince of Peace, and I expect that you’d agree that we could really use a Prince of Peace these days. If we pick up any newspaper or newsmagazine, listen to any news broadcast, or study the map of any continent, what we find is anything but peace. What we find instead is selfishness, greed, hatred, conflict, and death.

As you and I go about our shopping over the next several weeks, we will encounter people who are harried, hurried, tired, and overwhelmed—and we ourselves may be among their number. We will see persons who are desperately trying to nurture or to salvage relationships using money and “stuff” rather than by healing hearts and giving each other memories worth having.

This is a different sort of “unpeace” than that which we find on a global scale, but it is different only in degree, not in kind. Unpeace always comes from the same source, as the bumper sticker succinctly puts it: **“No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace.”**

⁵ Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 357.

Whether they speak through dot.com disasters or terrorist explosions, whether through layoffs, car wrecks, or even the flu, these earthly things we're tempted to trust for security and meaning simply cannot carry the weight of life. The message of Advent is that God invites us to find a new anchor for our souls, one that is absolutely and forever sufficient for our need.

So as we enter Advent, 2015, what are the priorities that *really* anchor your life? What is there about your life that *really* matters? This old world has never been very stable, after all. We move from crisis to crisis, from war to war, from boom to bust. In the midst of it all, Paul reminds us that "*this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:19, NLT).

Building on this foundation, Paul encourages us not to "*worry about anything: instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. **His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus***" (Philippians 4:6-7).

My friends, this "peace beyond all understanding" really is available to us,⁶ but it doesn't happen automatically. We have to choose to welcome and to experience it. Singer Ruthanna Metzgar had an experience that makes the point pretty well. Here's how she described it:

"As a professional singer, it wasn't unusual to be asked to sing for a wedding, but it was a bit unusual to sing for the wedding of a millionaire. I knew the wedding would be picture-perfect and was pleased to be able to participate, but when the invitation to the reception arrived I knew it would be something exceptional.

"The reception was held on the top two floors of Seattle's Columbia Tower, the Northwest's tallest skyscraper, and it was even more wonderful than I imagined. There were waiters wearing snappy black tuxedos who offered luscious hors d'oeuvres and exotic beverages for the most discriminating tastes. The atmosphere was one of grace and sophistication.

"After about an hour of merriment the bride and groom approached a beautiful glass and brass staircase that led to the top floor. A satin ribbon, which was draped across the bottom of the stairs, was cut and the announcement made that the wedding feast was about to begin. The bride and groom ascended the stairs and the guests followed. What a lavish event of which to be a part!

A gentleman with a lovely bound book greeted us as we reached the top of the stairs. "May I have your name please?"

"I am Ruthanna Metzgar and this is my husband, Roy Metzgar," I replied. The gentleman searched the M's.

"I'm not finding it. Would you spell it please?" I spelled it slowly and clearly. After searching throughout the book the gentleman looked up and said, "I'm sorry, but your name is not here. Without your name in this book you cannot attend this banquet."

"Oh, there must be some mistake," I replied. "I am the singer. I sang for this wedding!" The gentleman calmly answered, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you did. Without your name in the book you cannot attend this banquet."

⁶ Philippians 4:7

“The gentleman with the book motioned to a waiter and said, “Show these people to the service elevator please.” We followed the waiter past beautifully decorated tables laden with shrimp, whole smoked salmon, even gracefully carved ice sculptures. Adjacent to the banquet area was an orchestra, its members all dressed in dazzling white tuxedos, preparing to fill the room with glorious music.

“We were led to the service elevator, stepped in, and the waiter himself pushed “G” for garage. My husband, thoughtfully, did not say a word, nor did I. As Roy drove out of the Columbia Tower garage, we both remained silent. After driving several miles in silence, Roy reached over and gently put his hand on my arm. “Sweetheart, what happened?”

“And then I remembered: When the invitation arrived for the reception I was very busy and I never bothered to return the RSVP. Besides, I was the singer! Surely I could go to the reception without returning the RSVP!

“As we drove on I began to weep. I wasn’t weeping because I had just missed the most lavish banquet of my life. I was weeping because suddenly I knew what it will be like someday for people as they stand before the entrance of heaven: people who were too busy to respond to Christ’s invitation to His heavenly banquet; people who assumed that the good things they had done, even perfect church attendance or singing in the choir, would be enough to gain entry to heaven; people who will look for their name in the Lamb’s Book of Life and not find it there; people who did not have time to respond to Christ’s gracious invitation to have their sins forgiven and accept Him into their hearts.

“And then I wept again because I was so grateful that I had, many years earlier, received Christ as my Savior and can be confident that my name is written in the most important book of all: The Lamb’s Book of Life. Is your name there?”⁷

Let me end with one more four year-old story. One summer not long ago, Sandra Hanson’s daughter taught the four year-olds in Vacation Bible School in Rosemont, Minnesota. As often happens, the children were given yarn necklace nametags to wear around their necks. After the recreation time, one girl’s nametag had slipped around on her back, and she couldn’t see it. She was very upset and ran to Sandra’s daughter exclaiming, “Teacher, Teacher! I lost my price tag!”⁸

My friend, you have a “price tag,” too, with your name written on it. Your name is BELOVED, and the letters are written in blood. Are you wearing it?

⁷ Ruthanna Metzgar, excerpted in *Heaven*, by Randy Alcorn (Tyndale, 2004), pp.31-32.
<http://epm.org/articles/metzgar.html>

⁸ Sandra Hanson, “Heart to Heart,” *Today’s Christian Woman*.