

“Naming and Claiming”

“She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Our family name is only eight letters long but has been the source of endless confusion, misspellings, and mispronunciation over the years. It has gotten to the point where we keep a list of the many ways Laustsen has been misspelled (sometimes changing our family’s heritage or religion) and the curious ways in which people have attempted to pronounce it. Many of us have even had moments where we spell out the name to someone, only to have them look at us as if we did not know how to spell our own name! The problem is mainly rooted in the silent “t” in the middle of the name, a feature of the Danish language in which consonants are often silent unless there are two of them together; this often leads to the most common mispronunciation that includes the “t” and is also responsible for the most common misspelling that leaves off the second “s.” Since I have had this name my entire life, I have grown used to these experiences and am usually patient with people who struggle with our name; but one aspect of these experiences that makes me insistent is that they include the second “s” so that our name ends with “sen,” a vital part of the name that is a reminder of our Danish heritage and our family’s roots that have been traced back to the 14th Century. Our surname is far more than a means of identification; it speaks of the heritage and traditions that I inherited at birth from my parents, grandparents, and ancestors. It is the precious birthright that I have borne since the moment I was born into the Laustsen family.

While many of us have inherited our family names and heritage at birth, others receive this gift through being adopted into the family with whom we may not be related by blood but is in every way our most important relationship. As a child, I had a friend who would celebrate his “anniversary” with his parents every year, marking the day he was adopted and became in all ways their son and heir to their family traditions. In adopting a child, parents bestow on them their family name, heritage, and traditions that will be as central to their lives as if they received these gifts through birth. In giving their child the family name, the child is claimed as a full member of that family.

As we gather for worship on this fourth and last Sunday of Advent, we hear the story of the birth of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, who reports that *“the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.”* (Matthew 1:18). As the story begins, the Evangelist reports that several things have already occurred, beginning with informing the reader that *“his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph.”* In Jewish tradition at the time, engagement was a binding arrangement between people already legally considered husband and wife. At their betrothal, a man and woman would exchange vows of consent before witnesses; while they would be considered legally married, they did not yet begin to live together. The wife would remain with her parents for up to one year before the second stage of the marriage, known as “coming together,” would occur. It would be at this point that the husband and wife would move in together and the marriage would be consummated. An act of unfaithfulness during a betrothal would be considered adultery and could result in divorce and even death for the unfaithful spouse. This is why Matthew’s report that *“before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit”* would be so scandalous and present Joseph with a dilemma as to how he would respond. The Torah required capital punishment in such cases (*“If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married, and a man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death”* – Deuteronomy 22:23-24), but by Matthew’s time this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice that required a public trial that could be very humiliating for the woman. While Joseph is described as a “righteous man” (*dikaioi*), which meant that he would abide by the teachings of the Law, his righteousness is expressed in his mercy as he was *“unwilling to expose her to public disgrace”* (1:19) and decides to divorce her privately, still not knowing the manner in which Mary became pregnant. Joseph chooses *“not to follow the harsh punitive measures for adultery prescribed in the laws but to be merciful to his betrothed partner, whom he thought was unfaithful.”* (Eugene Park).

But before Joseph can act on his decision, God acts in sending an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream, a common means of communication throughout Scripture (*“And [Jacob] dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it”* – Genesis 28:12). The angel’s first words are to address Joseph as *“son of David”* (1:20), calling attention to Joseph’s own heritage and his crucial role in passing on Davidic descent to his son (*“... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah”* – 1:17). The angel’s address to Joseph is followed by words typical of angelic revelations: *“do not be afraid,”* words that would be spoken to the shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem on the night

Jesus is born as well as to the women who discover the empty tomb on Easter morning:

- “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” – Luke 2:10-11.
- “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said.” – Matthew 28:5-6a.

The divine message is that Joseph should “*not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*” (1:20). While Matthew does not include the announcement by the angel Gabriel to Mary that is featured in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 1:26-38), this angel announces to Joseph the divine act that has already occurred and the role that Joseph is to play in fulfilling God’s Will: “*She will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*” (1:21). In naming the child, Joseph would be accepting Mary’s child as his own and adopting him into the Davidic line as an authentic Son of David. The child is to be named “Jesus” (*Yeshua*), a form of the name “Joshua” who was the successor to Moses’ authority:

- “Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: ‘Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.’” – Deuteronomy 31:7-8.

The fact that Jesus inherits and fulfills Moses’ role will be an important theme in Matthew’s Gospel (“*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*” – 5:17). The name “Jesus” was fairly common among Jews during the Second Temple period (“*And Jesus who is called Justus greets you*” – Colossians 4:11); “*thus the Saviour receives a common human name, a sign that unites him with the human beings of this world rather than separating him from them*” (M. Eugene Boring). In naming the child Jesus, which means “Yahweh helps” (“*He became, as his name implies, a great saviour of God’s elect*” – Sirach 46:1), the name announces that the Messiah is the eschatological deliverer of the people of God, “*expressing their wishes and prayers for God’s deliverance from their current calamities, including oppression from colonizing empires.*” (Park). Joseph, therefore, has an important role to play for this child: “*to name a child is to claim the child as one’s own. Therefore, “Joseph, son of David,”*

in this act of naming, would make this child a legal heir to David” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri), continuing the covenant promise God made to David that *“the LORD will make you a house ... he shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever”* (2 Samuel 7:11-12). While first-century Jews were expecting God to save them from political oppression, the angel announces that the Messiah is coming to *“save his people from their sins”* (1:21), an enemy far more dangerous than Rome or Herod; *“thus also God’s own beloved Son was called Jesus not without reason but because he was to save his people from their sins”* (Martin Luther).

The Evangelist presents the first of several “fulfillment quotations” found throughout the Gospel, demonstrating the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the gospel of Jesus Christ: *“All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us.’”* (1:22-23). In its original context, Isaiah 7:14 refers to the promise that Judah would be delivered from the threat of the Syro-Ephraimitic War before the child of a young woman who was already pregnant would reach the age of moral discernment:

- “Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.” – Isaiah 7:14-16.

The child would be given a symbolic name: *Immanuel*, “God is with us.” In the next chapter, *Immanuel* is addressed as already present, indicating that the passage was originally directed to Isaiah’s own time (*“... its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel”* – Isaiah 8:8). *Immanuel* is also connected in the Old Testament with God’s promise to be with the Davidic dynasty (*“As the LORD has been with my lord the king, so may he be with Solomon, and make his throne greater than the throne of my lord King David”* – 1 Kings 1:37). Matthew understands the promise of *Immanuel* as the fulfillment of the whole of Scripture; Matthew’s faith affirms that Jesus is the one in whom the promised deliverance is realized, in and through whom “God is with us,” meaning that *“God will constitute him as the one who represents the continuing divine presence among the people of God.”* (Boring). The birth of Jesus *“as the one who personifies the salvation and abiding presence of God for the people of Israel will rekindle the same kind of communal hope for deliverance by God as was promised by the oracle of Isaiah.”* (Park).

Joseph's first act in Matthew is to obey the command of God: "*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*" (1:24-25). Joseph is the first person in Matthew to obey God's command; the Evangelist highlights Joseph's perfect obedience to the angel's instructions by telling us that he took Mary into his home and named the child Jesus, as he had been instructed. By naming the child, Joseph effectively adopts Jesus into the Davidic line. He does even more than the angel commanded in that he had no sexual relations with Mary until after the child was born so that the reader is certain that Joseph is not the biological father of the child.

- "In this story, Joseph give a name to the child of his wife, and by doing so, he symbolically, if not formally, adopts him as his own. That is, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is the natural son of God and an adopted son of Joseph. In that capacity, he is a legitimate 'Son of David,' which was a messianic title among the Jews at that time." – Park.

Joseph takes his place in the Christmas story as the one who will be the Guardian of our Lord, the one who will guide his wife to Bethlehem and find her a place where she would "*give birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger*" (Luke 2:7). Joseph would be at his son's side throughout those days in Bethlehem, including the time when the shepherds appeared and "*made known what had been told them about the child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*" (2:17-18). Joseph was with the child and his mother when the Magi appeared and "*knelt down and paid him homage*" (Matthew 2:11), and it was Joseph who led the Holy Family to safety in Egypt to avoid Herod's act of genocide in his slaughter of the Holy Innocents (2:16). Joseph is remembered to this day as the Guardian of Our Lord, who is remembered and honoured on March 19 as the one who was raised up by God "*from the family of your servant David ... to be the guardian of your incarnate Son and the husband of his blessed mother. Give us grace to imitate his uprightness of life and his obedience to your commands ...*" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship).

- "Christ's conception was the work of the Holy Spirit, but do not think this divine arrangement has nothing to do with [Joseph]. For although it is true that you had no part in the generation of Christ, and that the Virgin remained inviolate, nevertheless, what pertains to the father (not injuring the honour of virginity) that do I give you – the naming of the child. For 'you shall call his name.' Although you have not generated him, you will act as a father to him.

Hence it is that, beginning with giving him his name, I associate you intimately with the one who is to be born.” – St. John Chrysostom.

Whether we receive our family name through birth or adoption, our name is bestowed along with our heritage and tradition that will be at the center of our lives for as long as we live; our name is the means through which we identify ourselves and by which others know us. In naming the child in obedience to God’s command, Joseph becomes his father and bestows on his child his family’s heritage, a lineage that can be traced to Abraham and that includes David and the covenant promise that will not be the child’s heritage. It is this child who will be the one who will in turn bestow our heritage as people of God when we are baptized in his name; when we are baptized, we are *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). We are born anew to the living hope that is ours in Christ Jesus and are made heirs of an inheritance that is *“imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”* (1 Peter 1:4). As our family name is our primary means of identification, so now is the name we receive in Baptism the means through which we are known and by which we know ourselves: we are *“children of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.”*

- “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” – Galatians 3:27-29.

I try not to be too harsh in correcting people who misspell my family name, but every letter is important to me because it is the heritage and traditions that have been passed down to me by generations of the Laustsen family and the means through which I know myself and am known by others. As Joseph bestowed the name and heritage to the son who he would care for as his own, the child who would be Jesus the Messiah who would save all people from sin and anything that would separate us from God, through our baptism into the name of the child of Mary and Joseph we have our means of knowing that we are God’s beloved children, heirs of God’s promise that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Romans 6:5).

Amen.