



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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What's in a Name? Jesus

by Pastor Matt Hook

Christmas Eve Service - 9:00 pm

I used to dislike my name. Probably because my sisters called me “Mayotte.” Then in high school I saw it was one of the 5 most popular names and I decided I liked it. Do we have any Mary’s in the house tonight? Any Joseph’s? Any Gabriel’s? What about Augustus? Herod? Jesus? This evening, as we celebrate the moment of Christmas, I want to look at a few of those more unusual, powerful names in the Christmas story: Caesar Augustus, Herod the Great, and Jesus, because your name is known by the choices you make.

First, don’t make your choices “all about you.” The name Caesar Augustus means “Sacred King”.

What a great name. His choice was to live life “all about me.” Augustus was his name. Caesar was only one of the titles he bore. Others were Rex, Imperator, and Pontifex Maximus, to name a few. He ruled Rome and thus virtually the whole civilized world. He chose to be worshiped as a god. People burned incense to him. I don’t know about his connection with romaine lettuce, croutons, and anchovies, but interestingly, if the name of the man is remembered at all, most people remember him mainly because, some time during his reign (31BC-14AD), in a rundown section of one of his imperial provinces (Judea), out behind a little inn (in Bethlehem), a child was born to a couple of peasants... In many of his “moments,” he chose to make life “all about me.” He made the wrong choice. No wonder we don’t know his name.

Second, make your choices “out of jealousy.” The name Herod (the Great) means “Son of a Hero.”

What a great name. His choice was to go for all the power for himself, no matter what happened to anybody else. There were many Herods, but this Herod was the Ruler in Palestine during Jesus’ birth. He wasn’t so great, he was just the oldest son. (That’d be nice, for all you firstborns, wouldn’t it?) But he *was* a ruthless fighter, a cunning negotiator, and a subtle diplomat. Caesar and the Romans appreciated the way he subdued opposition and maintained order among the Jewish people. Under his rule, his territory experienced economic and cultural growth. He built huge palaces, murdered two of his wives, and put his sons to death, just so they wouldn’t supplant him. He had something like 10 wives and 15 children, and lots of murder.

We know Herod’s name because the wise men visited this Herod asking foolishly “*Where is he, born King of the Jews?*” It didn’t even strike them as suspicious when Herod asked them to be sure to let him know when they found him so he could hurry on down to pay his respects. Luckily for baby Jesus, the three magi were tipped off in a dream to avoid Herod like the plague on their way home. Herod was fit to be tied when he realized he’d been had and ordered the murder of every male child two years old and under in the district. For all his enormous power, he knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still. In his “moment,” Herod chose jealousy, rage, and power. He made the wrong choice. No wonder we don’t know his name.

Third, make your choices based on God’s plan. The name Jesus means “Jehovah is salvation.” Jesus is

actually the names of 5 people in the Bible: Jesus Barabbas, a prisoner released by Pontius Pilate before Jesus was crucified; an ancestor of Christ’s lineage; the KJV rendering of the name Joshua (who lead the people to the Promised Land); Jesus Justus a Jewish Christian who sent his greetings with Paul’s to the Colossians; and Jesus, the son of Mary. (Christ is not his last name! Christ means “Messiah” or anointed one.)

Jesus was a very real name of a very real human being, faced with choices throughout his life. He was a middle easterner who grew up to be a working man – a carpenter for at least 18 years, with muscles in his arms and calluses on his hands. He was no plastic saint. His world, like ours, was gritty and often smelly. His hands got dirty. He often slept on the ground. And when his life ended, he suffered a dirty, sweaty, bloody death. But in every moment, he chose God. A humble, faithful man named Jesus.

But the man named Jesus was also very truly God in the flesh. He wasn't just a good teacher. He wasn't just a super man. He was the Son of God. His name was given in a moment – to Joseph in a dream. Christmas itself all happened in a moment – a most remarkable moment. It was like no other, because in *that* moment a spectacular thing happened. God became a man named Jesus. While the creatures of the earth walked unaware, Divinity arrived. Heaven opened herself and placed her most precious One in a human womb. The Omnipotent, in an instant, made himself breakable. He who had been spirit became pierce able. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And the One who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent on the nourishment of a young girl, named Mary. What a moment!

God as a fetus. The Creator of life being created. God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. God came near. He came not as a flash of light but as a baby named Jesus, who's first cries were heard by a peasant girl and a sleepy carpenter. The hands that held this baby, this God given a name were unmanicured, calloused, and dirty.

No silk, no ivory, no hype, no party, no hoopla. If it wasn't for the shepherds, there would have been no reception. Without the stargazers, there would have been no gifts. Angels watched as Mary changed God's diaper. The universe watched in wonder as God learned to walk. Children played in the street with him. Just think if the teacher in the synagogue had known who was listening to his sermons! (What a moment *that* would have been!)

For 33 years he would feel everything you and I have ever felt. He felt weak. He grew tired. He was afraid of failure. He susceptible to what others thought of him. He got colds, burped, and had BO. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired. And his head ached. (That's weird, isn't it?)

To think of Jesus in that light is – well, it's almost irreverent. We don't usually think of him like that. It's uncomfortable. It's much easier to keep the humanity out of the equation. You know, clean the manure from around the manger. Jesus is easier to stomach that way. There's something about keeping him divine that keeps him distant, packaged, predictable.

But don't keep Jesus at a distance. Let him be as human as he intended to be. Let him into the mire and muck of our world. Only when we let him in can he pull us out.

Listen to him:

- “*Love your neighbor*” was spoken by a man whose neighbors tried to kill him.
- “*Pray for those who persecute you*” came from lips that would soon be begging God to forgive his murderers.
- “*I am with you always*” from the One who was separated from all as he accepted our sins on the cross. These are words of a God who in one instant did the impossible to make it all possible for you and me.

Jesus – it all happened in a moment. In one moment, the Word became flesh. What did “Jesus” mean? – “Jehovah is salvation.” And we're still talking about him. There will be another moment. The world will see another transformation. In becoming human, Jesus made it possible for humans to see God. When Jesus went home he left the back door open. As a result, “*we will all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.*” (1 Cor. 15:51,52).

The first moment went unnoticed by the world. But you can bet the second one won't. "*At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord.*" (Philippians 2:10,11).

Next time you hear or use the phrase "just a moment", remember that's all the time it will take to change this world.