

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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This gospel readings sounds a lot like what we read on Christmas Eve. However, the last verse is where today's feast day comes into play. We heard that on the eighth day, Jesus was circumcised and was given the name Jesus. All in all, it's a routine Jewish experience for an infant boy. With circumcision, the child was included in the Abrahamic covenant– that is the covenant where God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants, which would be as numerous as the stars. For me, the more interesting part comes at the back half of this final verse, which says, “he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

Naming the child Jesus was important. After all, names are a significant part of our identity. The name we are given by parents can carry cultural or familial connection. Some change their names to better reflect their essence, history, personality, or gender. Still others adapt, shorten, or use part of their name.

Because of the power that names carry, my partner's name was changed as a child. Originally, he was born with a first, middle, and last name of "Alexander Paolino Gibson." Paolino was his middle name and is his mom's last name. Gibson is his father's last name. Shortly after his parents made that his legal name, his parents were at home and began reflecting on his name. While his name had both maternal and paternal aspects, they acknowledged that so often the middle name is silenced and that the feminine voice is often silenced in the world as well. Ultimately, they went and legally changed his name to first name, Alexander, no middle name, and last name, Paolino-Gibson. Now, his name change complicates background checks, but his name also voices the importance of feminine equality, his name communicates a change in the way the world often devalues mothers, and his name reflects his family's values.

So too, the name “Jesus” reflects values and illuminates God’s nature. To understand this connection, we need to have some fun with a history/lingual lesson. So, stick with me. The name Jesus comes from a Greek translation of the Aramaic short form *Yeshu’a* (Yea-shoe-ah)—Jesus’s actual name. The longer form of this name is *Yehoshu’a* (Yea-ho-shoe-ah), which in English we say Joshua. Now *Yehoshu’a* (Yea-ho-shoe-ah), comes from the roots *yeho* and *yasha’*. *Yeho* refers to the Jewish God, YHWH or Yahweh, and *yasha’* means “to save.” So, *Yehoshu’a* (Yea-ho-shoe-ah) literally “God saves.”

Ok, so if I lost you, come back to me. Here’s the summary. Jesus’ name is the same as Joshua, and this name means “God saves.” Now, here’s part two to this exploration— the historical biblical component.

Joshua is an important figure in the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament. He was Moses’ assistant and then, took over leading the Israelites to the promised land after Moses died. His leadership was one built on fighting to occupy or take the land promised to them by God. He, then, split up the land they acquired and divided among the tribes of Israel. At the end, Joshua told

the elders and chiefs of Israel to not mix with the native populations, because it could lead them to be unfaithful to God (Joshua 23).

Why does this all matter? Well, as we read through Luke's gospel, it's important to remember that Jesus received the name Joshua. Names matter. Names communicate values. In this case, however, we'll contrast this newly born Joshua, this Jesus with the Joshua in the Hebrew Scriptures. We'll learn that Jesus birthed a *new* Israel, not based on laws of purity that reject the outsider, but rather, this new Joshua, this Jesus welcomes the outsider. Jesus will reveal that God's work is centered in love, radical generosity, peacemaking, and forgiveness. Jesus will make the argument that he is the new Moses, the new Joshua, that will free this newly formed Israel from the tyranny of evil. Jesus will shock his audience when he tells a parable about religious leaders who passed by a man in need, but how a good Samaritan was the only one to care for this man. This new Joshua, this Jesus is going to will reveal the ways that systems, social forces, and status quo tend toward corruption and superiority of the few. You see, names matter. Names communicate values. This new Joshua, that is Jesus, will hold on to the centrality that "God saves" and at the same time, Jesus will redefine salvation.

And as we begin this new calendar year, we have an opportunity to think about the values communicate with our names. Sure, we can think about our

personal name, like the Rev. Jason Scott Glombicki or Dr. Jordan Diego Chua. But, perhaps more collectively we can think about our shared names. After all, back in 1879 the founders of this church didn't go with St. Luke, St. John, or Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. Rather, they named our ministry Wicker Park Lutheran Church. And, names matter, and names communicate values. So, how is our identity shaped by the term "Wicker Park" in our name? Or what does it mean that we are called "Lutheran" and center our identity in a reformer who strove to clarify and expand God's work? What does it mean to claim the name "Christian" and our identity focused on learning from Jesus and acknowledging Christ's presence? What does it mean that through the baptismal waters we have taken on the likeness of Christ, or that at Christ's table God's essence becomes embedded into our DNA? Today, we wonder, what these names that we embrace communicate about our identity and our values.

Perhaps this reflection will reveal what we value and help us re-center ourselves in serving our neighbor through the little free pantry, The Night Ministry feedings, or the Advent Project. Maybe it means we can find ways to love our neighbors especially the children under five who cannot be vaccinated. Knowing the importance of Jesus named as a new Joshua, then

maybe it means that we need to take names more seriously by taking the time to learn how to pronounce the names of people of color or to honor the names that our trans siblings embrace. Maybe it means acknowledging that our Christian faith and tradition reveres names and honors the cultural, historical, and familial roots that names carry. Maybe, just maybe.

Well, friends, I'm going to leave us here to ponder Jesus' identity. To give us the opportunity to acknowledge the values that shaped Jesus' ministry and the ways Jesus transformed and reshaped their understanding. As we move into this new calendar year, let us give thanks for a God who reveals an identity of love, justice, and grace. Let us ponder the identity that we embrace and for the names that we claim. Let us give thanks for the new Joshua, named Jesus. Amen.