

“A Guardian Name”

Matthew 1:18-25

Names in the Bible always have deeper meaning beyond the words. For we Cleveland baseball fans, supporting our young team into the second round of the playoffs, the new “Guardians” name has deeper meaning than the name. Most of us know the name comes from the iconic Guardians of Traffic just outside the ballpark on the Hope Memorial Bridge.

Last spring, Tom Hanks voiced a video introducing the Guardians with these words. . .

We are a city on the rise. Forging into the future from our ironed-out past. We are a city of fire and water, of trees and towers built through generations of blue collars and the brightest scholars – and all of those who have worked harder. We hold tight to our roots and set our sights on tomorrow, but this is our team that has stood with our city for more than a century from Old Municipal to the corner of Carnegie. A team that has seen its own progress and prosperity. Its history flows like the river through the heart of this city, the history that has given us miraculous moments. Moments that broke barriers and moments that broke hearts, moments that prove that this is more than a game. We remember those moments as we move forward with change. You see, there’s always been Cleveland – that’s the best part of our name. Now it’s time to unite as one family, one community, to build the next era for this team in this city. To keep watch and guard what makes this game the greatest. To come together and welcome all who want to join us. We are loyal and proud and resilient. We protect what we’ve earned and always defend it. Together we stand with all who understand what it means to be born and built from the land – because this is the city we love and the game we love. And together, we are all Cleveland Guardians.

Names always have deeper meaning beyond the words. In our gospel text Jesus is given two names with deeper meaning.

In the first chapter of the gospel of Matthew, the birth of Jesus is foretold. The story begins in controversy, with Mary, the mother of Jesus, found to be pregnant. This creates an issue for Joseph, to whom she is pledged to be married. Not wanting to humiliate her publicly, he decides to divorce her quietly.

But then an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and says, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (v. 20). Joseph realizes that Mary has not been unfaithful to him, but that her pregnancy is an act of God.

Then the angel says, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (v. 21). This is the first guardian name given to this child: *Jesus* is the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means *the LORD saves*.

Matthew tells us that all of this takes place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah: “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” — which means “God with us”. This is the second guardian name given to the child: *Immanuel* means *God with us*.

When Joseph wakes up, he does what the angel of the Lord has commanded him. He takes Mary home as his wife, and when she gives birth to a son, he gives him the name Jesus.

Jesus, meaning *the LORD saves*.

Immanuel, meaning *God with us*.

Both are clear, strong, guardian names.

What's in a Name?

We know how important it is for professional sports teams to have names that send a clear message. But what about biblical names? Professor of religious studies Russell Fuller says that the names of individuals in the Bible are always full of meaning, expressing “their personality and status or nature.” In the Bible, a name is always more than just a word.

We see this most clearly when a person's name is changed in recognition of a change in their nature, personality, or status. For example, Jacob's name is changed to Israel after his successful wrestling match with a divine being. Abram's name is changed to Abraham after the creation of the covenant with God. Saul becomes Paul after he becomes a follower of Christ. The names of newborn children, says Fuller, are “carefully chosen to reflect the circumstances of their birth as well as to indicate something of their personality or status.”

- The name Moses means “to draw out,” reflecting Moses' rescue as an infant from the waters of the Nile.
- The name Miriam means “drop of the sea, bitter, or beloved.” It later evolved into the name Mary.
- The name Elijah means “the LORD is God.”
- The name Jesus means “the LORD saves.”
- And the name Immanuel means “God with us.”

In the Bible, a name is always more than just a word. It expresses personality, status and nature. So, what does it mean to say that the Son of God is both *Jesus* and *Immanuel*?

Both names embody who Jesus is: Savior and God-with-us. Both invite us to respond — not just with the cheers of a sports fan, but with deep faith and commitment.

Jesus, the first name, means “the LORD saves,” and that Jesus will save his people from their sins (v. 21). Jesus has been sent to earth to be the One to save us from all the sins and shortcomings that fracture our relationships with God and the people around us. We make such a mess of our lives, as individuals and as communities, that we need a Savior to rescue us. Jesus does this by offering us forgiveness for our past failings, and guidance for the path that lies ahead. We might sing about his saving work at Christmas, using the words of the carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”:

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;

Cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.

Cast out our sin — that’s the work of Jesus, the Savior. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus came to “remove sin by the sacrifice of himself” on the cross (Hebrews 9:26). Jesus casts out our sins, once and for all, in an act that never needs to be repeated. He lays down his life for us in an act of loving sacrifice, one that brings us forgiveness and new life.

We need Jesus to save us. He does for us what we can never do for ourselves, no matter how hard we try. Each of us is like an addict who discovers that recovery requires turning to a higher power — a power greater than ourselves. When we put our faith in Jesus the Savior, we find that forgiveness and change are possible.

Immanuel, the second name, communicates that God is with us (v. 23). Turning to a higher power also helps us discover that we are not alone. With Immanuel in our lives, we are never alone. Using the words of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” again:

We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us; abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Jesus came to abide with us, to live with us, to stay with us forever. That's the work of Immanuel, God with us.

We need this now, more than ever. Loneliness is a problem this time of year, especially on December 21. This is the day of the winter solstice, when the sun sets at its earliest point all year, creating the longest of nights.

Churches have discovered that the Christmas season is not a bright and happy time for every member of the congregation, and we need to acknowledge their pain and pray for healing and help. Since the days become longer and longer after the winter solstice, there is reason to believe that light can return, and darkness can be overcome. People also find hope in the support of the community, and the chance to draw closer to the One who is our Lord Immanuel, God with us.

As we move toward Christmas, let's keep the guardian names of Jesus and Immanuel in front of us. They tell us that Jesus is our Savior, coming to save us from sin and deliver us to new and abundant life. He is also Immanuel, God with us, the surest sign that our Lord is with us in every time and place and situation. With Jesus, we are never trapped in our sins and shortcomings. With Immanuel, we are never completely alone.

There is nothing controversial about these names. Instead, they are perfect descriptions of the One who commands our faith, our trust and our deepest commitment.

May the peace of God . . .

#279 – O Little Town of Bethlehem