

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
Dr. David Renwick
December 21, 2008

CHRIST! WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Apostles' Creed III
Isaiah 9:6-7

This is one of the services in the year, perhaps the only one, where we turn things around and where the Sermon is in the place of the Children's message and the Children's Message is in the place of the Sermon and the length of those two should be turned around as well. So you have the right today to time me. What I have to say should be around five or six minutes in length (and we'll give a longer period of time to the children in a moment or two).

I want to speak for about five minutes on the importance of a name. What's in a name? In our sermons recently we've been looking together at the Apostles' Creed and we've been thinking about what we believe. In the Apostles' Creed, one of the things we affirm is that "we believe in Jesus Christ." We believe in "Jesus Christ" - in those two names: in "Jesus" and in "Christ." But what is it about these names that we believe in?

In the Christmas reading from Isaiah 9, we are presented with a number of names for the baby who is to be born: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. In our opening hymn we picked up on another name given to the baby, this time in Matthew's gospel, when we sang of "Immanuel" - O Come, O Come, Immanuel. Immanuel is a name which means "God With Us." These are all names given to the baby 'but the names by which we know that baby more than any other names are the names "Jesus" and "Christ."

These are not insignificant names. It's not just as if the baby was called David Renwick or Susan Moorefield or Bill Arthur: a first name and a last name; names chosen because they were nice, or because of a family connection. Rather, these names have a deeper significance. These names have meaning. Remember the angels coming to Mary and to Joseph? And it's as if the angels say, "You have no option about the name of this child: you SHALL call him Jesus" -- and there's a reason: "for he will save his people from their sins." The Hebrew form of "Jesus" is Yeshua, from which we get our "Joshua." And the name means "God saves." In other words, the baby is to be given a name which reflects *who he is and what he does*, and when we say "we believe in Jesus,"

- we're saying that we're believing in him as our savior;
- that He is the one who saves us;
- we're saying that we need a savior,
- that we know that without his help, we are helpless. We cannot save ourselves.

If you can save yourself a little, you have a helper. You have an assistant. If you cannot save yourself at all, you have a savior, somebody who stretches out their hand to you when you are at the end of your own resources and lifts you up out of the mire. It's like struggling in quicksand. The more you struggle, the worse it gets unless there is somebody on the outside pulling you up. You cannot make it. That's what a savior is. And when we say that we believe in Jesus, we're saying we believe that he is our savior and without his help, we are helpless.

But we don't just call him Jesus. We also call him "Christ." It's not a last name like Renwick is a last name. If the baby had a "last name," it would probably be "Bar Joseph," son of Joseph (since people assumed that Joseph was his father), or the name would refer to the place he came from (we sometimes call him Jesus 'of Nazareth'), but the name "Christ" functions in a different way: it is a title given him. It should really be Jesus "the Christ": Christ is a Greek word which means "Anointed One." In Hebrew the word for 'anointed one' is "Messiah": Hebrew "Messiah"; Greek "Christ"; English "Anointed One." So, in the creed we are saying that we believe in Jesus, the one who is my savior, and my "Anointed One" - But what in the world does that mean?

There are two primary kinds of people in ancient Israel who were anointed. Kings were anointed and priests were anointed. When we say that Jesus is our Anointed One, we are saying first of all that he is our King, that we need direction in life, that we are lost unless somebody is there to tell us what to do and where to go, and we will listen to his voice. We will hand over the authority of our lives to his direction. Our lives are not our own. They belong to someone else. They belong to this king and we are willing to let him lead us because without him, we are lost:

- I believe in Jesus - he is my savior.
- I believe in Jesus Christ. He is my king. I'm helpless without him. I'm lost without him.

He is also my priest. A priest comes to us when we are in debt and when our relationships are broken: when there is nothing we can do to pay whatever is needed, to do whatever it takes, to mend that broken relationship. At such a time we need an intermediary, somebody between us and the other person who pulls us together so that that relationship is healed. That is what a priest does. He stands, in this case, between us and God, and brings us into the presence of God and says, "Whatever it takes, I will offer as a sacrifice to heal this relationship." In this case, Jesus the Priest offers himself. No other sacrifice will do. He offers himself, his whole life for you and me - for the one purpose of bringing us back into an intimate relationship with God that nothing and no one can destroy. The debt is paid, the guilt is gone, the failure, the broken-ness, our constant returning to our old ways are all pushed aside. No matter what the past holds, it does not matter: Jesus the Christ, the priest, is always there for us, pulling us back to God and saying, "I paid the price. It's ok."

This is who he is. This is what we believe about the baby born in the manger.

- He is a wonderful counselor, the best, wisest guide we could ever have.
- He is a mighty God, powerful for every occasion in our life.
- He is the everlasting Father. He does not come and go but he is there forever with compassion in our lives.
- He is the prince of peace who wants us to restore peace between us and our maker, us and God, us and one another.

And we cannot do this by ourselves, so ***he is also "Jesus Christ": our savior, our king and our priest.*** He comes to us as those who are helpless. He comes to us as those who are lost. He comes to us as those who are in debt and he says, "I'll take care of it. All of it. Come to me and in my presence, you will find life." May we this Christmas receive the gift of this Jesus, the Christ, the baby and find life in his name.