

Reach – Throw – Go. I still remember those three simple words from the Lifesaving merit badge that I earned as a Boy Scout over 40 years ago. *Reach* a swimmer in distress with a pole or a paddle or a branch they can grab onto so you can pull them safely to the shore. If you don't have anything long enough to reach them, get a rope, preferably with a flotation device attached to it and *throw* it out to a swimmer that needs help. Once they have grabbed ahold of the flotation device, slowly pull them to shore. If there is a canoe or a boat available, row to the swimmer and follow one of these approaches. If none of those strategies work, or if the swimmer is no longer conscious, you will have to enter the water. *Go*. It is your last resort.

Nowadays, the requirement for the Lifesaving merit badge states, “Correctly demonstrate the rescue of a conscious practice subject 30 feet from shore in deep water using two types of buoyant aids provided by your merit badge counselor. Use a proper entry and a strong approach stroke. Speak to the subject to determine his condition and to provide instructions and encouragement.”

My merit badge counselor at Camp Custaloga wanted to make the water entry as difficult as possible, so you could count on the “practice subject” flailing and splashing wildly in the water as you approached him. And we weren't given flotation devices to take in the water with us, either. But he also had what I thought was something of a dirty trick. As you attempted the rescue he might have other Scouts or adults behind you or at poolside shout your name. Have you ever tried to ignore someone calling your name so you can focus on the task at hand? It's really tough. Turning our attention toward someone who shouts our name is a reflexive response. Repressing that response so you can calm a panicked swimmer 20 or 30 yards in front of you isn't an easy job.

Names have power.

*“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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. 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.’”* (Matthew 1:20-21).

When we meet Joseph in today's Scripture he is in bad shape. He is probably depressed and angry, as well as bewildered. He has learned that Mary, the young woman promised to him in marriage, has gone and gotten herself pregnant.

As 21st century Americans, we might wonder why Mary's pre-marital pregnancy is an issue. In our corner of the world, lots of people who aren't married have babies. For Joseph, however, we need to know this is a very big deal, indeed. Mary is pregnant with a child for whom Joseph knows he is not the biological father. Joseph has recourse in the law; he could go to the priests, accuse Mary of unfaithfulness, and then stand back while Mary was stoned to death for her transgression. She is supposed to be a virgin, and if she is no longer a virgin, the betrothal contract is no longer binding. Matthew tells us, however, that Joseph is a righteous man and doesn't want to humiliate her. He decides to resolve the situation by quietly divorcing Mary.

At this point, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, and suddenly everything is changed. The angel gives a name to the child Mary carries within her: a son, whom Joseph is to name Jesus, “*the one who saves the people from their sin.*” The child has another name: *Emmanuel, God-with-us.*

The naming issue is crucial. As a pious Jew, Joseph possesses memory of promises made by God to those who are Joseph’s ancestors: God, who told Abraham, “*I will be your God.*” God, who told Moses, “*I will be with you.*” God, who spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “*A child will be born from a virgin, and his name will be God-with-us.*” Knowing the prophecies, remembering the traditions, Joseph does as the angel tells him. He takes Mary as his wife but does not have marital relations with her until after the birth of her child. Then, as he has been instructed, Joseph names the child “*Jesus.*” Wouldn’t you do what an angel told you to do?

Joseph was bewildered, scared, basically, caught up in the inertia of his circumstances when he learns of Mary’s pregnancy. In effect, what the angel tells him to do is: “Listen to the name. The name has power.”

As we come to the end of Advent, there is a sense in which we are like Scouts in Lifesaving class, up to our necks in deep water, not knowing which way to turn. For whatever reasons, we may feel panicked at the direction in which our lives may be heading. We see the world going to pieces all around us. We feel abandoned, maybe sort of lost. But then, from somewhere comes the familiar voice, calling us to safety, the voice of God, through the angel: *Jesus.* That’s the name we needed to hear. The one who saves. *Emmanuel. God-with-us.*

The name has power. Because of that name, all will be well.

“Nobody except churches announce when the Advent and Christmas season begins. They just change the music in the stores and in the mall sometime during the week before Thanksgiving,” says Alistair Begg. All of a sudden, you realize that you’re walking through the mall to the tune of something deeply religious, like “Jingle Bell Rock” or “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.” Or maybe it’s something with a religious theme, like Charles Wesley’s timeless Christmas carol “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.”

The change of music indicates that Christmas is coming. And when Christmas is coming, there is a lot to do to get ready. So the sentimental songs and the cheesy songs and the religious songs just wash over you throughout December. They are on the radio as you make sugar cookies. They are on the commercials that remind you of all the presents you haven’t bought yet. They are on your playlist when you have friends over. And then, all of a sudden, it’s Christmas Eve, as if the whole month has collapsed over you... and Christmas happens and then it’s all over and the songs on the radio and in the mall go back to Top 40 or Oldies because it’s January.

But if you listen a little closer, you’ll realize that some of the familiar music around us really does encapsulate what the season is all about. “Once in Royal David’s City” is a good example of a carol with a message. You may want to reopen your hymnal to page 183 to locate the carol that we just sang. I wish they would play it on 3WS—because it takes us to the heart of Christmas. Alistair Begg says it’s his absolute favorite Christmas carol. Here are four reasons, he says, why we should pay closer attention to this carol.

First, it begins with history. *“Once in royal David’s city.”* That means the events it describes happened in a timeframe. And they happened in a geographical location—the city where the greatest Old Testament king of Israel (David) grew up: Bethlehem. There was a point in history when this event actually occurred, in a real place and at a real time. Matthew and the other Gospel writers did not set out to write stories—they set out to record history. Have we all understood that the Gospels are not fables—that they are facts?

Second, it takes us to divinity. *“He came down to earth from heaven.”* The second person of the Trinity—the eternal, Creator God—came from heaven and stepped into time and lived in his creation. The baby born in Bethlehem that first Christmas night was God—God *“moving into the neighborhood,”* as Eugene Peterson whimsically puts it in John 1:14.

If Jesus were just a remarkable man, or a prophet, or a great teacher, then we will stumble here. If that’s who we’ve determined he was, then we will have issues with the virgin birth. We will struggle with the idea of miracles. We will be unable to believe in the resurrection. But once we acknowledge that the baby born in Bethlehem was God, then that makes sense of everything we read in the Gospels. Suddenly, this man walking on water, turning water into wine and feeding five thousand with a boy’s lunch is not only possible, it’s what we’d expect to see, because the Creator has shown up. When we read the Gospels, we read what happened when divinity entered history.

Third, it shows us Christ’s humanity. God the Son entered history as a human. As the hymn says, *“He was little, weak and helpless, tears and smiles like us he knew.”*

This line is often dismissed as Victorian sentimentality. It’s not though. Babies are helpless. In fact, adults often are too. Babies are moved to cry and to giggle. Adults often are too. God came to earth as a helpless human baby—that is amazing. And he lived on earth as a real man, experiencing the ups and downs that are part of our lives—that is wonderful.

Fourth, this carol shows us Christ’s majesty. *“And he leads his children on to the place where he has gone.”* At God’s right hand on high...

God became a human so that humans could live with God. The baby Jesus grew into the man who died on a cross so that he could open the way to heaven. He became the man who rose from the tomb so that he could rule from heaven, at his Father’s right hand. And he became the man who sent his Spirit to open people’s eyes to the truth about him. We shall all see him at God’s right hand on high. We all have an appointment with him there.

History, divinity, humanity, majesty—four wonderful words that encapsulate Christmas. Yet one wonderful word underlies all four of those words. Technically, a name; the name of Jesus. One word; one name above all other names.

Whenever we hear our own name, it always gets our attention. But the name of Jesus should command our attention whenever or wherever we hear it. Even when we’re up to our necks in a frustrating or difficult situation, simply speaking his name will bring a sense of comfort and peace and joy.

*“And you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins,”* said the angel. It is a lifesaving name. Because of that name, all will be well. The name has power. Amen.