Child

Good morning, boys and girls. Today we are going to talk about something that is very important to you. We are going to talk about your name and the names of others. All of you have names, don't you? (Let them answer.) Let's tell everyone your name. (Encourage each of them to stand and speak his or her name.) Names are very important. We not only call each other by a name, but we write our names on important papers. And when we get married we usually give our names, if we are a boy, to the girl that we marry or, if we are a girl, we usually take the name of our husband, There are a lot of things that we use our names for and that is what makes a name so important.

I have a list of names in this book that parents sometimes use when they are waiting for their baby to be born. Every name that you can think of is listed in this book and it also says what the name means. I picked some names out of the Bible to see what they meant and I will share them with you. Did you know that the name David means "beloved" or that Ruth means "companion"? Here is a good one, Philip means a "lover of horses" and, of course, Peter means "rock." Martha is another way of saying "lady" and the prophet Malachi was named to mean "my messenger." Those are just a few of the names in the Bible that have a special meaning to us.

But here is the most special one of all. Do you know what the name of Jesus means? Do you remember that an angel of God came and spoke to Joseph, and told him that Mary, the woman he loved, was going to have a baby boy? (Let them answer.) The angel also told Joseph what God wanted Joseph and Mary to name the baby. Did you remember that also? (Let them answer.) The angel told Joseph that God wanted this baby to be called Jesus. Do you know why God wanted them to call him Jesus? (Let them answer.) Because, the name Jesus means "to save God's people from their sins." That is what the name Jesus means. Your name means something: the name Philip means "lover of horses" and Jesus means "saving God's people from their sins." That's what Jesus did. That is why the name of Jesus is so important and why God did not name him Pat or Henry or Bill or any other name. God wanted people to know Jesus and also to know what Jesus was going to do. Now you know why names are so very important and why Jesus' name is the most important of all.

Adult

On Christmas Day 1988, a beautiful story by Karen Zautyk appeared in the New York Daily News titled “Remember, It is Love That Makes Us Rich.” The story tells about a place in Edinburgh, Scotland, called The Museum of Childhood. This museum is filled with childhood treasures of the upper classes such as elegant teddy bears, puppets, rocking horses . . . and cases and cases of dolls.

“In one corner, however, in a solitary case is a worn raggedy doll, much the worse for wear . . . [A sign on it says,] `Doll belonging to London slum child, circa 1905’ . . .”

It is a sad and dreary doll “that can bring tears to your eyes because it is so pitiful. And because it is so very, very beautiful” because some slum child loved it so much. Then the author of this article adds these meaningful words:

“If you cannot appreciate the story of that raggedy doll, you cannot appreciate the story of Christmas. A pitiful doll loved into beauty—[that’s] us. We are that doll. Look at us. Who are we that God should love us so? There is nothing to recommend us. Nothing but God’s love—love that came down at Christmas.” (1)

The Christmas story begins, of course, with a young woman named Mary. Mary was betrothed to a man named Joseph, a virtuous man, a descendant of David. Mary and Joseph were residents of Nazareth, a town in Galilee.

Betrothal was for a period of one year and was as binding as marriage. It was so official that, during this year, if Joseph died, Mary would be considered a widow. Mary was quite young, probably 13 or 14, but she was wise beyond her years.

Still, she was unprepared for what was to happen to her. God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to carry a message to Mary, a message that would change her world and ours. The angel came to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Luke tells us that Mary was greatly troubled at Gabriel’s words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.  But Gabriel said to her, “Don’t be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

Mary gave a very sensible response to Gabriel’s announcement that she would bear a son whose kingdom would reign forever: “How will this be,” she asked, “since I am a virgin?” We will come back to her response in a few moments.

Gabriel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary responded. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. What a beautiful story. No wonder it has inspired millions of people over 2,000 years since its occurrence.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary. Angels are messengers of God. Their appearances are very rare. We don’t have a reliable picture of an angel. Artists generally picture them with wings. That’s based on a few reports in the scriptures. Generally, when angels appear to people in the Bible, their first words are something like, “Don’t be afraid.” So maybe it’s good that they don’t make many appearances in our present world.

According to a news story in USA Today some time back, a woman in California found a package on her doorstep that contained a car key and a note. The note quoted Bible verses and ended with these words, “This is a gift for you because I love you.” It was signed, “An angel of the Lord.”

In her driveway the woman found an almost new car. It was just what she needed to replace her unreliable, twenty-year-old automobile. A neighbor child asked, “Did God just drop the car down from heaven?” That would be scary.

The woman’s answer was not reported, but she did hang a poster on her garage that said, “THANK YOU, GOD.”

Mark DeHaan shares this woman’s story in the devotional book Bless the Lord, O My Soul. He writes, “Putting up that sign didn’t mean the woman actually thought the car had fallen out of the sky without touching human hands. But notice that her sign did not say, “THANK YOU, MY ANONYMOUS FRIEND.”

“She was acknowledging that all things ultimately come from God,” (2)

Still, she did not think for a moment that a literal angel was involved in providing her with the much-needed car. She knew that her good fortune was made possible by an ordinary flesh-and-blood, but kind and generous human being. Which suggests to us that anyone in this room can be a Christmas angel if you look around and find someone whose life you can make a little brighter with a generous gift. Something to think about. The angel Gabriel came to Mary.

Mary was a virgin betrothed to a righteous man named Joseph. I said that we would come back to this. It is a stumbling block for some people—the idea that Mary was a virgin. Some people even in church smirk at the very idea. I wonder why. I wonder if that doesn’t say more about us than it does about Mary. I have not a doubt in the world if some brilliant scientist was to one day announce that, in his or her laboratory they had manipulated the laws of nature in such a way that they had made it possible to create a new human being without needing the traditional union of a male and a female, we would hardly blink an eye.

Think about it. I mean, thanks to the magic of 3D printing, scientists are already making artificial organs in laboratories that they are implanting in human bodies. And those implants are functioning like the real thing. It may be just a matter of time until scientists cross the final threshold and create a whole human-like being. The only thing they could not give these creatures is a soul. No wonder some of the brightest minds in our land are afraid of A.I.—Artificial Intelligence. Think about a body without a soul. What I am describing is Frankenstein’s monster.

What I am trying to say is that some of us have a picture of God that is far too small. If you think that science is wonderful and amazing, how about the God who created this amazing world? Look at the stars. Look at a new-born babe and contemplate the meaning of life. Science is on the threshold of some wondrous new discoveries that will cause us to stand in awe. Yet all they are doing is tinkering with tools that God has provided. The more I know about nature, the more I know about science, the more I stand in awe of the God who gave us the gift of life and this marvelous universe that we inhabit.

Is it too big of a leap of faith to believe that the God who created these amazing bodies that we inhabit could choose to have his Son be born of a virgin if He so desired? To me it isn’t a troubling idea at all. In this holy season open your mind and your heart to the idea that God entered the world in the unique person of Jesus Christ and it will change your life. Jesus really is the Son of God and He wants you to take your place in this world as a child of God.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary with a message from God that she would bear a son who would be called the son of the Most High. Thus did Jesus enter our world. To me it is the most beautiful and believable story in the world. Not because of the angels, not because Mary was a virgin, but because of the impact that Jesus’ coming had on the world.

Noted speaker and prolific author John Ortberg recently compiled a list of “Six Ways that Jesus’ Birth Changed the World.” The list is not exhaustive—in fact it barely scratches the surface—but it’s enough to convince me that Jesus was a man like no other. Let me mention a few of the ways Ortberg said that the world was changed because of Jesus.

He begins with the status of Children. “In the ancient world,” John Ortberg notes, “children were routinely left to die of exposure, particularly if they were girls. Jesus’ treatment of and teachings about children led to the forbidding of such practices.”

Next his impact on Education. “The ancient world loved education but tended to reserve it for the elite; the notion that every child bore God’s image helped fuel the move for universal literacy . . . Universities such as Cambridge, Oxford, and Harvard all began as Jesus-inspired efforts to love God with all ones’ mind.”

Next the notion of Compassion. “Jesus’ compassion for the poor and the sick led to institutions for lepers. These institutions were the beginning of modern-day hospitals.”

Then there’s the virtue of Humility. Did you know that before Jesus came into the world, humility wasn’t considered a virtue? Jesus’ life as a foot-washing servant would eventually lead to the adoption of humility as a widely admired virtue.

Forgiveness was also a radical idea that had its roots in Jesus’ life. “In the ancient world, virtue meant rewarding your friends and punishing your enemies. Imagine how shocking it was when the humble preacher Jesus taught that what is best in life is to love your enemies and see them reconciled to you.”

Humanitarian Reform. “Jesus consistently championed the excluded . . . including women. Slaves . . . might wander into a church fellowship and have a slave-owner wash their feet rather than beat them.” (3)

Again, this is not an exhaustive list, but when I consider all the ways the world was changed by the coming of the Christ child into the world, I want to cry out with the centurion standing at the foot of the cross as Jesus breathed his last: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39).

The coming of Christ ushered in a whole new world. God’s vision for the world is yet to be realized, of course, but it is coming—thanks to the babe born in a manger. There’s still too much pain in the world, too much hatred, too much war, too much fear, too much poverty, too many children living in deplorable conditions.

Yes, God is moving slowly, but surely, in this world. The reason He is moving slowly is that He has chosen to work in this world through ordinary people like you and me, respecting our freedom, giving us the right to say no, just as Mary had the freedom to say no when the angel Gabriel came to her and told her that she would bear a son. Her response was to say, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” That should be our response when Christ calls us to do his work in the world.

 Christ touched the world as no one else has ever touched the world. Has he touched your life? I hope he has. I hope the message of Christmas, this Christmas, will invade your life as it has never before, and you will join those who count themselves as his disciples seeking to bring his kingdom to this world so that one day the whole world will resound with the angel song of peace on earth, goodwill to all people everywhere. Amen.

1. Contributed by Dr. John Bardsley.

2. 365 Devotions for Prayer and Worship. Our Daily Bread Ministries, Our Daily Bread Publishing. Kindle Edition.

3. https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/november/6112816.html.