

Jesus' many names (Matthew 1:18-25)

Thank God Joseph recognized him.

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Who is Jesus, anyway?

It might sound sacrilegious to ask—especially so close to Christmas. But maybe this is just the right time. After all, in this week's Gospel text, a variety of sacred names are assigned to him:

- Jesus, which means “he saves”
- the Messiah, “the chosen one”
- Emmanuel, “God with us”

And before that, Matthew's Gospel takes great pains to elucidate the genealogy of Jesus, listing no fewer than 40 ancestors, from Father Abraham to King David and beyond.

Ironically, of course (at least in Matthew), Jesus isn't really heir to that elite and sacred line-up, since they are through Joseph's heritage—not Mary's. Even worse, though Jesus bears the heavenly identity as child of the Holy Spirit and fulfillment of God's promise through the prophet, he is also tagged as the illegitimate offspring of a woman who brought shame to her husband and father.

But maybe the contrast is intentional—and even a foretelling of what is to come:

- Jesus is King of Kings—but he will also be crucified by Herod, the king of the Jews.
- Jesus is teacher and Lord—but he will also be denounced by the scribes and Pharisees.
- Jesus is the Savior—but he will also be taunted that he cannot save himself.

Which tells us that it's not Jesus' identity that is unclear—it is our ability to recognize him. Thank God that Joseph did.

Maybe that is the reminder that we need this season. If Jesus really is “he who saves,” then we have reason to hope that we ourselves may be rescued from shame or disgrace of our own and from the sins we've inflicted on others. If Jesus really is “son of the Most High,” then we have reason to imagine that the corruption in our systems doesn't stand a chance to overrule God's love for the world. If Jesus really is “God with us” still, then we have reason to trust that we are not alone or forgotten.

Yes, it's almost time to celebrate Jesus' birth again. But it only matters if we recognize him for who he is—and trust that he is here.