



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Advent 4

**[RCL] Isaiah 7:10-17, Psalm 24, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25**

### In Jesus' Name

What does the name of Jesus tell us about the mystery of the Incarnation?

A verse from Hymn 489 in The Hymnal 1982 describes this mystery:

*He sent him down as sending God; in flesh to us he came;  
as one with us he dwelt with us, and bore a human name.*

The gospel reading from Matthew tells of the divine origin of Jesus' name, told to his adopted father, Joseph, in a dream. There are actually two names discussed in this passage. The first is *Jesus*, the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua or Yeshua, which means "God saves" or "Yahweh, help!" This is the name imparted to Joseph by the angelic messenger. The second name is *Emmanuel*, which, we are told by the Evangelist, means "God with us," and is from the Book of Isaiah. As if the meanings of these two names weren't weighty enough for a newborn baby to bear, the Gospel of Matthew opens with Jesus' genealogy. This genealogy is a long list of forty-two generations of Jesus' ancestors through Joseph, which demonstrates that Jesus is in the line of David, and illustrates God's continued activity among the people of Israel.

So many names, and we're not even to Chapter 2 of Matthew's gospel! Clearly, names, and specifically Jesus' name, are very important.

The fact that Jesus "bore a human name" speaks of his specificity as a person. Jesus is human, and so he has a human name. One cannot be a generic human being. Every human is an individual, with unique DNA, a specific set of parents, born into a specific historical moment, into a specific culture, and into a specific social class.

Jesus, "the Word made flesh," as the Fourth Gospel calls him, was not just human, but a *specific individual*. He had the same challenges that we all have: trying to grow up and thrive in the particular set of circumstances into which he was born. Although we believe that Jesus is co-eternal with God, and so in some sense was present at the creation of the world, he set all that aside when he was born as Mary's son. Jesus experienced the limitations of being contained in a human body, a mortal body.

The fact that Jesus has a human name describes his limited human nature. To name something is, in a sense, to define it. In Genesis, Adam names the animals as a sign of the dominion that God has given him over them. Later in Genesis, Jacob wrestles with the divine stranger at Peniel and demands to know his name, but the stranger will not tell him. He won't let Jacob "grasp" who he is, physically or conceptually. Instead, the stranger re-names Jacob. Even though it is Jacob who ultimately wins the wrestling match, it is the heavenly stranger who has the power to name. Jacob has become Israel.

That God became flesh and bore a human name means that he became "graspable" by us: accessible, not abstract or distant, but present and reachable. We have a claim on Jesus; we can call on the name of the Lord and be saved. To have a human name is to be able to be known, in part if not fully. We know Jesus through our prayers, through calling on his name. We have some power, some claim, over all-powerful God, because God has revealed God's name to us.

Matthew dwells on the meaning of these two names, Jesus and Emmanuel, because they contain a *paradox*. Jesus is born to a human mother, born into poverty and into circumstances of political oppression that he did not create. But his *name* is given to him by God. It is an expression of his connection with God and proclaims that his coming is the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus' name means that God is now dwelling with humankind in a new way. It reflects that Jesus is the one sent by God to free us from our human limitations. God accepted the limitations of human life in order to free us from these same limitations and to bring us the *eternal* kind of life *now*. This is God's salvation, God's indwelling in human nature expressed in the person of Jesus.

*He sent him down as sending God; in flesh to us he came;  
as one with us he dwelt with us; and bore a human name.*

This Christmastide, may we all come to know and to call upon the One who took on human flesh and human nature and even a human name. May we be freed from our all-too-human failings, as we are reconciled to God with joy.

O Come Emmanuel, be born in our hearts this week and always. Amen.

**The Reverend Dr. Regina Walton** is a poet, scholar, and teacher. Her poetry collection *The Yearning Life* won the Phyllis Tickle Poetry Prize and was published by Paraclete Press in 2016. An Episcopal priest, she is Denominational Counselor for Anglican/Episcopal and Lutheran students and a Lecturer at [Harvard Divinity School](https://www.harvarddivinityschool.edu/). She serves as the Editor and Content Developer for the Center for Episcopal Discipleship and Renewal at Forward Movement.



Sermons that Work and Bible Studies that Work are a joint offering of Forward Movement and The Office of Communication at The Episcopal Church.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible-study/>  
<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work>