

IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

As we draw closer and closer to Christmas, you may be making preparations for travel. Perhaps you've made airline reservations for a ski trip out West. Maybe you've booked a room somewhere warm. Or maybe you're going to take an old-fashioned road trip to Grandma's house!

Linda and I took a road trip this past summer to my mother's in Kentucky. We normally fly, but we had to deliver some family heirloom furniture to my sister, who lives in the same town. So we loaded up the car, tied a bureau on the roof rack, and headed off looking for all the world like the Beverly Hillbillies.

It's a fourteen hour drive to my mother's—one way. It is superhighway most of the trip, so the driving itself is easy. But it's a long time to be in the car. And while reading and conversation help while away the hours, there does reach a point where a little outside stimulation is in order. The radio would seem a logical solution, but once you're south of the Mason-Dixon Line its all country music and Bible thumping gospel preachers. And I can handle just so much Garth Brooks, Conway Twitty and hellfire before I go bonkers! So, to pass the time, we bought a book to take with us called *365 Questions for Couples*.

Some of the questions were very innocuous: "Tell me the best birthday you ever had." "What was your favorite game during childhood?" Some of them were a bit risqué: "Tell me about your first kiss" turned out to be one of the milder ones in the section simply titled "Sex". Some of the questions were quite challenging: "If there was a play based on your life what would it be called?" "If you had to be either deaf, mute or blind, what would you choose?" And after ten hours in the car with your spouse, what husband wants to answer "Do you think that there are some things that, in general, men are better at than women?" Especially if she's driving!

One set of questions was especially intriguing: "Do you like your name? Have you always felt this way about it? If you could change your name, what name would you like to be called?" For the record, by the way, we both like our names; always have, and, if we were to be called something else I would opt for Jack for me and Linda would want to be called Sammy. Don't ask—I don't know!

Imagine my surprise when the very next day after we'd talked about these questions Andy Rooney's newspaper column was all about names!

"Most of us like our names," he wrote, "We can't imagine being called anything else." He goes on to talk about nicknames, popular names, and even the President's name.

“President George W. Bush,” he writes, “was lucky his parents gave him the middle ‘W’ standing for Walker. It inhibits anyone from calling him ‘Junior.’ A President shouldn’t be called ‘Junior.’ As a matter of fact, no one should be called ‘Junior.’” (Connecticut Post, 8-30-05)

In our culture names are indeed rather important. They often play a role in shaping our very personalities. But for first century Jews, a name carried much more weight than it does today.

Vicki Crooks writes about the day her four-year old son asked her about God’s name. Crooks explained that in the Bible God has many names: Lord, Yahweh, the Almighty, Father. “After listening to my long explanation,” she writes, my son asked, ‘Can I just call him Steve?’” (Christian Reader, “Kids of the Kingdom”)

Cute, but for first century Jews it didn’t work that way. For both divine and human names were never arbitrary. As one scholar notes: “Naming in the [first century] Jewish context has to do with essential being and not merely labeling.” (M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, VIII: 135) In other words, a person’s name was said to sum up an individual’s very essence, who they were, what they did.

Such an understanding helps explain the significance of our passage from Matthew. For, unlike modern parents, Mary and Joseph didn’t go through a book of baby names to find one they liked. (“What do you think, Joseph, should we name him Thaddeus or Derek?”) No, Joseph is given explicit instructions from God: you shall name him Yeshua, Jesus. It means “he saves”—and that is just what he is going to do. It will be the very focus of his life and work.

As Jesus grew up he probably worked side-by-side with Joseph, learning how to plane a piece of wood, taking great satisfaction in a finely finished piece of furniture or a properly fitted yoke for oxen.

And, as they worked together, they probably talked. Maybe Jesus shared with Joseph some of his thoughts about God, about his hopes and dreams, about his future. Maybe Joseph offered the young man some bits of advice or wisdom. No doubt he also wondered just how this son of his would live into his name. How he would fulfill his destiny to bring about salvation. Fathers do that—we often think about the future our children face, no matter what their names. And in our own way, we try to prepare them for what lies ahead. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fail. But that is at the core of being a father.

Ray Anderson is now a professor, but he grew up on a farm in South Dakota, where he worked side-by-side with his father. And in doing so, he didn’t just learn about crops and cows.

“My father,” he writes, “was an ordinary man, no better or worse than a hundred other men I knew during my boyhood. What made him special was the fact that he

was my father and he taught me everything I really needed to know about life.”
(*Unspoken Wisdom*, 124)

Boys, of course, eventually grow up and become men. And for most the time comes when they leave home and strike out on their own, to take their own road trip on the path of life.

Ray Anderson was eighteen when his time came.

It was 1943, and America was at war. Anderson wanted to serve his country, but he didn't want to be drafted into the Infantry, so without consulting his parents, he enlisted in the Army Air Force.

The day came for Ray to head out for basic training. His father drove him to the train station in the next town over. The Andersons, being stalwart, Midwestern Lutherans, weren't much for showing emotion. “Out of respect for [my father's] sense of decorum,” writes Anderson, “I pretended not to notice the single tear that shed down my father's cheek” “He sat quietly while I got out of the car. Not looking directly at me, he shook my hand, and with a quaver in his voice said, ‘Remember who you are, Ray, and you will be all right.’” (*Ibid*, 89)

And with that, the boy who'd become a man on the plains of South Dakota, the baby who'd grown up, headed off into his future. His days of innocence had come to an end.

In a few minutes the choir and our guest musicians will share with us Hailstork's *Songs of Innocence*. These delightful songs are reminders of infancy and childhood, reminders of those days when we first began to grow into our own names. Reminders that even the one we call Lord and Savior started out as a baby, a baby who was, no doubt, held in the loving arms of Joseph, even as he named his newborn son Yeshua, Jesus, the one who saves.

Joseph doesn't appear in the stories of Jesus as an adult. Not once, in the many gospel accounts of his public ministry, do we hear again about the carpenter who raised him up. Traditionally it has been said that Joseph was an older man and must have died before the crucifixion. And that may have been true.

But I like to think that as Jesus prepared to leave Nazareth and head out on his own journey, Joseph was still alive. I like to think the old carpenter pulled his son aside and gave him that gruff sort of hug we fathers give our sons because we dare not cry. And then, remembering the angel's words so long ago, remembering the sweet smell of his infant son's body and the innocence of his first smile, wanting to offer him a few final protective words, I like to imagine that Joseph whispered something in his ear like “Remember who you are, Jesus, and you'll be all right.”

Sisters and brothers, at your baptism you were not only named Joe or Sally or Bill, you were also named a son or daughter of the Most High. You were also named a Child of God. Remember that well. For as you travel on the road trip of life, with all its twists and turns, such a memory can guide you on your way.

Remember who you are, Child of God, and you will be all right.

**Amen
John H. Danner**