

Nothing Routine

(About the Name of Advent's Child)

"The Lord himself will give you a sign: Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel"
(Isaiah 7:14)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Fourth Sunday of Advent,
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"*Nothing Routine*" is the theme around which I've clustered the four Sundays Advent. I want you to hear the phrase, *Nothing Routine*, as mission-oriented, these the words of Commander Jim Lovell of Apollo 13 who, when asked in the pre-launch news conference in April 1970 if it bothered him that the public was coming to regard moon missions as routine, famously leaned into the microphone to say, "*I assure you, there's Nothing Routine about flying to the moon.*"

Those words wonderfully describe the redemptive mission upon which God embarked. Even for deity it was, to quote Neil Armstrong, Commander of Apollo 11, no small step, but a giant leap. Hebrews calls Jesus the *Commander of our Salvation* and, as *Mission Commander of this ADVENT-ure* to seek and save the lost, is described in Chapter 10 in what I've called the pre-launch moment: "*When Christ came into the world he said, sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me.*" While temple sacrifices had become *Routine*, there was *Nothing Routine* about Jesus' mission to offer a once-for-all atoning sacrifice, a mission he engaged when God emptied himself to become the infant of Bethlehem's manger.

When a child is born, a name is given. I've found one of the most blessed moments of infant baptism to be the naming ceremony, the moment when, taking the child into my arms, I ask the parents, "*What is the name given this child?*" Our texts this morning -- Isaiah and Matthew's quotation of Isaiah -- is about this naming. So, let's consider today that there's *Nothing Routine about the Name of Advent's Child* -- "*Emmanuel.*"

What's in a name? Surely many of you have sought out, as have I, the meaning of your own name. Siegfried is a name from Germanic mythology, a hybrid of two roots – *sig*,



meaning *victory* and *frithu*, meaning *peace*. Siegfried means, then, something like *Victory's Peace*.

In biblical times Hebrew names were precisely defined and immediately obvious, often conveying fine-tuned religious and cultural messages. This morning we consider the best known of all examples, Emmanuel, meaning “*God with us*.” Like my name, Emmanuel is a hybrid: *Immanu (with us)* and *El (God)*. There’s *Nothing Routine* about the Name of Advent’s Child.

Conveyance of a theological message in one’s name was the norm in Semitic cultures. Entirely Routine. Western cultures, though, have tended to de-emphasize this feature of the naming of a child. The names we give our children are not routinely chosen for their meaning, but rather for reasons of *Sound* and *Sentiment*. Most here likely bear a name chosen by mom and dad because either the *Sound* of your name was pleasing to them, or because of *Sentiment*, i.e., you are named after someone highly regarded.

One fascinating historical exception to that trend is that of the Puritan communities in 17th century New England. Some of these names, known as Virtue names, stuck. Others, and thankfully, did not. Among those that stuck -- Constance, Prudence, Charity, Temperance, Faith, Grace, Hope, and Joy. These names are with us still and convey an obvious moral message.

Other Puritan attempts to pack a sermon into a name have not survived. In English, such names sound ridiculous, leaving us to wonder if the Puritans were just kidding. They were not. Dead serious was the young Puritan couple who named their baby boy “*Kill Sin*.” So, Mr. Kill Sin Pemple shows up in a marriage list of official county records. One may wonder if his friends called him by his first name, Kill; or by his middle name, Sin. Or, perhaps they used a nickname, some New England equivalent of Bubba!)

Many of you love that passage in Galatians where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit – Love, Joy, Peace. One Puritan couple, Mr. and Mrs. Fowler, loved it so much that they named their boy “*More Fruit*.” Court records show a Mr. More Fruit Fowler seated as a juror in 1607.

Remember Paul’s words to Timothy, “*I have fought a good fight?*” One Puritan couple, the White family, used Paul’s epistle as a *Book of Baby Names*, naming their boy *Fight the Good Fight of Faith White*, a name in New England marriage records.

I must tell you about the Barbone family, who gave their son the first name Nicholas. Routine enough, to be sure. At least he had a handle to go by, since his middle name was hyphenated 11 times! *If-Jesus-Christ-Had-Not-Died-for-Thee-Thou-Hadst-Been-Damned*. Put it all together: Nicolas If-Jesus-Christ-Had-Not-Died-for-Thee-Thou-Hadst-Been-Damned Barbone. His father’s name was simpler, by the way, Praise-God Barbone, who sat as a member of Parliament.

All of these fellows were tagged at birth with names transforming them into living, walking, breathing religious bumper stickers! *Nothing Routine* about these names!

Suppose this were common practice today. Let’s imagine Sylvia Matthew’s parents had wanted to emphasize a firm belief that Jesus is coming again. So instead of Sylvia Matthew’s heading

our list of lay servant leaders as Chair of Church Council, we might have on our church records, “*Jesus Is Coming Soon*” Matthews. Or, remember how Jesus described his coming as a “*Thief in the Night*” and says his coming will arrive “*In the Hour You Think Not.*” What if Gene and Glen Phillips’ mom and dad had named their twins “*In the Hour You Think Not*” and “*Thief in the Night.*” I can imagine mom, scolding her children for playing with something off limits. “*In the Hour You Think Not . . . I think not – put that down now!*” Oh, and “*Thief in the Night . . . don’t be a little thief! Put that back where it belongs!*”

Indulge me, please, for one more example. My favorite sermon-in-a-name from 17th century New England is the name Mr. and Mrs. Andrews gave their son, “*Flie Fornication.*” Imagine the young Mr. Andrews being introduced to a pretty girl at whatever then passed for the high school sock hop. “*Betty, I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Flie Fornication Andrews.*” Praise God for nicknames! “*Yes, that’s my name, Betty. Please call me Junior!*”

Before I “lived in” to my name, I went through a time when I wished I had a nickname. Few children starting school in Pine Bluff in 1960 bore the name Siegfried Sigmund. There was *Nothing Routine* about that name, not in Pine Bluff, anyway. Perhaps it would have been routine had I lived in Munich, or in Copenhagen, the city from which my father’s side of the family immigrated to the United States after the Civil War. I recall cringing just a bit on the first day of class at elementary school, worried if a new teacher might botch my *Nothing Routine* name, leading the children to giggle at my expense. Calling the roll, she might breeze through the more *Routine* names -- Jims and Joes, Debbys and Margarets. Effortlessly, she would call the roll until coming to my name. If an irregular pause ensued after Peggy Johnson’s name, I knew I was in trouble, watching as the teacher studied my name, imagining her saying to herself, “*This is Nothing Routine. Who is this foreign kid?*”

As an adult I toyed with the thought of going by initials. My father, whose name is Hans Siegfried (bearing only half of his name, I didn’t quite have the option of being called “Junior”), was known throughout his career in the timber industry as H. S. Johnson. I thought those initials, H. S., possessed a sturdy, dignified sound. I thought to give it a try, but discovered that all initials are not created equal. “S. S.” Johnson didn’t have the elegant touch of “H. S.”. Imagine Carol Bodge, Chair of our Staff-Parish Committee, introducing me this past July. “*I would like to introduce to our COH congregation our new Senior Pastor, the S. S. Johnson.*” Sounds too much like a pastoral battleship patrolling turbulent seas!

When it comes to names that convey a message, “*Emmanuel*” is the grandest of them all. John opens his gospel, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS God.*” How earth-shaking, then, is the moment when the *Commander of our Salvation* embarked upon a mission in which the *Word* would *become flesh to dwell with us.*

What shall this child be called? Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, seeing in Jesus a second fulfillment of a prophecy in which Isaiah said to King Ahaz of Judah, “*The Lord himself will give you a sign, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son and you shall call his name, Emmanuel.*” Our acquaintance with Isaiah’s prophecy is as a Christmas snippet scissored out of its context and pasted into our Christmas songs and sermons. Had the Holy Spirit not led Matthew to pick out this verse, you and I would not at all recognize it as a Messianic prophecy. It would instead be lost in the *Routine* political entanglements of Israel. Very few Christians today recognize any

verse within a chapter in either direction of Isaiah 7:14. That's because the history providing the backdrop for the Emmanuel prophecy is, well, *Routine*, not spoken in anticipation of beautiful Christmas carols, but addressing a flesh and blood situation, a political crisis played out 700 years prior to Jesus' birth.

Up for a quick history lesson? In 735 B.C. the Middle East was in turmoil. "So, *what's new?*" we might ask. If our political leaders stumble over how to handle the Middle East, it was the same then. Isaiah is writing in a time when a powerful Assyrian king named Tiglath-Pileser III (I'll call him T. P.) was subjugating the region. T. P. was considered by surrounding nations as a threat to the stability of the region, causing several nations to join in an anti-Assyrian coalition.

King Ahaz saw the anti-Assyrian alliance as a lost cause against such a powerful king as T. P. so, wanting to align with the eventual winners, he bet on Assyria. Jerusalem's king was refusing to join the majority of nations in that region, making the Anti-Assyrian alliance most unhappy. The vote of condemnation against Jerusalem was lopsided, the coalition turning against Jerusalem, ready to overthrow King Ahaz and set up a puppet regime. In short, it was Jerusalem standing alone. Isaiah writes (7:2) that when Ahaz heard the alliance was approaching, "*the heart of Ahaz . . . shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind.*" He was scared! These were frightening days of instability and terror. The king was trying to act wisely, but had he steered Jerusalem on a course toward disaster?

If all this is beginning to sound *Routine*, like something in today's newspapers, it's because I want you, for just a moment, to hear this prophecy without the imagery of Bethlehem, without the manger, without shepherds in the field and gift-bearing magi from the east. We hear Isaiah 7:14 with Christmas pageants dancing in our heads. I want you to remember that these words were first spoken in the midst of an historically *Routine* political crisis.

Enters Isaiah, marching right into the Situation Room of Jerusalem's White House. His message? "*Do not fear. Do not let your heart be faint.*" Isaiah is saying, "*You've made the right choice . . . stick with it despite the alignment of nations against you. They are wrong. Despite their numbers. You are right.*" Isaiah underscores his message saying, "*The Lord himself will give you a sign: a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall name him, Emmanuel.*" Isaiah then assures Ahaz that before this child even grows to be a toddler, the alliance which Ahaz fears would be vanquished, vanished.

Isaiah's words, then, are first addressed to a *Routine* historical situation. "*How can that be?*" one asks. "*Could there have been TWO virgin births?*" The answer to that question resides in the Hebrew word translated "*virgin.*" The Hebrew word is '*almah*, meaning, "*young woman*" (it may refer to a virgin, but not necessarily). Matthew, though, clearly uses a word meaning Virgin (*parthenos*). Making this verse a messianic prophecy, Matthew wasn't denying its first fulfillment seven centuries previous, but rather glorifying God that Jesus' birth was a second fulfillment of the prophecy, a virgin-born fulfillment. Matthew sees Jesus as, in the highest sense, *Emmanuel*.

Susan Baker of Shelbyville, Kentucky tells of finding a beautiful puppy that had wandered onto her back porch. Her husband was assigned the task of writing an ad for the "Lost and Found" column in the local newspaper. He first wrote, "*Golden Lab, male, approximately nine months*

old, no collar, very friendly, found on Rockbridge Road." Susan read his draft and expressed worry that the excessive detail might encourage just anybody to claim the beautiful animal. She asked her husband to abbreviate the ad. Once. Still too much information. Twice. Again. Growing frustrated at his wife's editorial rejections, he continued to trim the wording of the ad. At last Susan's frustrated husband submitted this ad. It said -- no kidding -- it was actually printed in the paper just like this: "*Guess What I Found?*"

The Puritan names I mentioned earlier were given in earnest hope that their children would never have to GUESS who they are! *Emmanuel* is a name given the Christ child so that we would never need guess who this child is – *God with Us*.

Nothing Routine about the Scope of Advent's Mission:
The world.

Nothing Routine about the Wonder of Advent's Love:
A Son

Nothing Routine about the Solace of Advent's Consolation:
The Consolation of Israel

Nothing Routine about the Name of Advent's Child:
Emmanuel, God with us!