

Mary, Mother of God

Think for a moment about how you got your name. Most people receive their name from their parents. Some people got new names in adulthood, perhaps because of marriage or even because of some dislike of the name they received at birth. Some people have earned a title that replaces their name. Within families we have Mom, Dad, aunt, uncle, Grandma, Grandpa. We also call physicians, ministers, politicians, judges and military personnel by a title. Some people get a nickname because of a physical trait (“Shorty”), some personal accomplishment (“Ace”), or some foible (“Stinky”).

But think about your name, how you got it and why. Did your parents like the sound of it? Are you named after someone else in your family? Are you named for a personality known for beauty or fame? Or is your name totally unique? Your name probably tells you something about who you are and what your parents expected you to become. Many parents assign a name even before the child is born. They already intuit something.

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus officially received his name from his parents not on the day he was born, but - as was traditional at the time - on the eighth day, one week after he was born; that is, the day we observe today. However, Jesus first got his name from the archangel Gabriel, who appeared to a young virgin named Mary, told her that she was to bear a Son, and that she was to name him Jesus.

Jesus wasn’t named after anyone, even though his name in Hebrew is the same as the Old Testament figure Joshua. The name Jesus means “savior”. He received that name because of his mission: he would save us from our sins. The word “Hosanna” shares the same root - you can hear the connection between “Joshua” and “Hosanna”. When we sing “Hosanna in the highest” we profess that no one else can save the way that God does. Jesus goes by other titles, such as Son of God, so that we do not miss the reason why Jesus alone can save.

Mary also has many titles, but we honor her today by one in particular: Mother of God. That title caused some controversy in the history of the church because people wondered how God could have a mother. How could God still be God if there were a mother before him? Well, God existed long before Mary existed, but God’s Son, the Word made flesh, entered the world in time in the form of a human. We call Mary the Mother of God because her Son is God. He is one with the Father. We use that difficult word in the creed each week: consubstantial. It means that Jesus possessed the same substance as his Father. He is consubstantial with the Father. You could also say that he was consubstantial with his mother; he possessed the same human substance that Mary possessed. This is the great mystery of the incarnation: Jesus is fully human and fully God.

We are not so blessed. We are human through and through. We do wondrous things as our names, titles and nicknames aver. But we also do some sinful things. At the end of the calendar year, our gratitude for our blessings confronts the realization of our failures. No matter what our name is, we need not despair. This is why Jesus has the name he received: He is the savior who takes away the sins of the world.

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