Mary, the Holy Mother of God

Eight days after his birth, he was given his name. At the annunciation, Gabriel had said to Mary, "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." In Matthew's gospel, the angel appeared to Joseph with a similar message about Mary: "She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus." Perhaps anticipating some objection from Joseph about this name, the angel gave an explanation: "because he will save his people from their sins." We'll never know if the two parents wanted to call this child something else because Gabriel came up with the name, and—don't argue with an angel.

In the Old Testament, God changed several names: Abram became Abraham, the father of many nations; Sarai became Sarah, the princess; Jacob became Israel, the one who wrestles with God. Jesus changed Simon to Peter, the rock; he also nicknamed James and John "Boanerges," or Sons of Thunder, because of their temperament.

How did you get your name? Who decided what you would be called? Why did they pick that name? Most people are named by their parents, though not everyone. Parents may choose a name because of someone in the family they wish to honor, someone whose traits they hope will pass on to a new person. Or they name a child after a celebrity, hoping the child will become as famous or beautiful or handsome as the original. They may come up with a unique name or a unique spelling of a common name to show they favor the individuality of their child. They may just like the sound, testing out the new first name against the last name to make sure they work together. My father was William Turner, named after his father William Turner; his only sibling, his older sister, had already been named Billie after the same man. When my parents started having children, they loved Grandpa Turner, but they decided with Big Bill, Little Bill and Billie already in the family, they gave the six of us other names.

Later in life, you may get a nickname because people see something more in you, or a title because of something you've accomplished. Or you may change your name because you want to be called something else for some other value.

In Jesus' case, the name came from the angel who liked its etymology. In Hebrew Jesus' name is Yeshua, the same name as the Old Testament figure Joshua. We call the two of them different names in English to distinguish one from the other, like the two apostles Jude and Judas, who have the same name in Greek. Yeshua means "savior"; it's the basis for "Hosannah", which acclaims the God of salvation. The angel said Jesus was to save his people from their sins.

Gabriel predicted Jesus would have his own people, who became known as Christians because of his title: Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. The angel also foresaw that we Christians would be sinners, and that we'd need some help. The birth of Jesus was wonderful, but his name vented something about the world he entered: It's a mess. It's filled with sin. But it's nothing a Savior can't fix.

As we enter this new year, we may be making resolutions that admit we are sinners: We aim to do better than we normally do. Let's work at them with confidence that God will help us be better people who make the world a better place. After all, we're not alone. We have a savior.