

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Tuesday, September 08, 2026

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Solemn Eucharist

5:30 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

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What's in a name?

“And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.”

Birthdays are wonderful celebrations of what makes us human; we all share them and, yet, each one is different – even the birthday of twins that happen on the same day. Birthdays proclaim that we are unique – different from everybody else and yet, as we heard in our Gospel story, part of a family tree.

We rarely read the beginning of Matthew's Gospel because of its long list of names that fills lectors with dread. At seminary we used to call this gospel passage “a reading from the Jerusalem phone book!” But it is so important because it reminds us that Jesus was just like us; he was part of a family tree; he had ancestors, and he had a name: ‘Jesus who is called Christ.’ The name Jesus means Savior – and Christ means ‘anointed one.’ Mary and Joseph were told by the angel that the child in Mary's womb was to be named Jesus because he would save his people from their sins, and in today's Gospel he is also named Emmanuel: God-with-us.

Names, therefore, say something about ourselves and our place within our family and our community. That is why the removing of a name, as in the case of those who were in the concentration camps in the second world war and replacing it with a number, is a deliberate attempt to de-humanize. In today's feast, we celebrate the fact that Jesus is not just nice words, or hopeful sentiments, but a real person with a real name, part of a family growing up with Mary and Joseph, and a within a community that believed itself to be God's family.

At our baptism, our names were used at the font. Now, we must remember that baptism is *not* a naming ceremony. That happens after the *birth* of the child so that the birth can be registered. At baptism, the child (who already has a name) is brought to the font and given a new name – *Christian* – which immediately identifies the child with the family tree of Jesus Christ. On this feast day of the birthday of Mary, we affirm her and her husband Joseph as our ancestors – not just in the faith but, quite literally, in the flesh. Mary of Nazareth became the Mother of God; Joseph became the Guardian of the Word made flesh. As their names are now associated with God's plan of salvation, how will our name feature in God's plan?

Some words of Henri Nouwen:

When God calls, God gives us a new name. Abram became Abraham; Jacob became Israel; Saul became Paul; Simon became Peter. We must search for this new name because the new name

■ *reveals the unique vocation given to us by God.*
