

“The Lord is our Righteousness” (Jer. 33:16) Advent 1, November 29, 2009

These days, not only is it popular to give babies unusual names, but also to give names unusual spellings. That’s fine. You have to be careful, though, because names have meanings – sometimes surprising meanings. Take the case of a certain Pastor Synde. She knew her name was derived from “Cynthia,” but it never occurred to her that the *spelling* might be a problem. You see, her parents had been a little creative, spelling it S-y-n-d-e. Well, imagine her surprise when a little old lady told her what her name means in Norwegian. It means “to sin!” And that’s not the only example I can think of. I used to know a Pastor Schlecht – in German, Pastor “Bad.” I also had a Professor Stuhr – Professor “Stubborn.” I once baptized a boy named Klein – in German, “little.” He’ll wind up being well over 6 feet. So you see what I mean about names and their meanings!

Back in biblical times, babies were given unusual names, too, but there was no chance of any surprises. Names were carefully chosen *because* of what they meant. That was especially true for the names given the coming Messiah. In Isaiah 7, he is called *Emmanuel*. In Isaiah 9, he is called: *Pele-yo’etz*, *El-gibbor*, *Avi-ad*, *Sar-shalom*. And in our text, Jeremiah gives yet another name: *Jahweh-sidqenu*. Each one is quite a mouthful! Lucky for us God settled on the name “Jesus!” Yet, as unusual as they may sound, each of these names has a special meaning that reminds us who our Savior is and what He came to do. “Jesus” – in Hebrew, *Yehoshua* – means “the LORD saves.” *Emmanuel* means “God is with us.” The names in Isaiah 9 mean “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Everlasting Father,” “Prince of Peace.” And last but not least, there’s the name in our text, *Jahweh-sidqenu*, which means **“The LORD is our righteousness.”**

I don’t think I’ve ever preached on this name before – **“The LORD is our righteousness”** – and for the life of me, I can’t tell you why, for the name is so full of meaning! In fact, the heart of the Gospel, the heart of salvation, is revealed in this name for the Messiah. Because it is, I can’t think of a better way to begin Advent than by reflecting on this name – what it means *for us* that **“The LORD is our righteousness.”** So let’s do that.

To really understand the name, let’s first be clear what **“righteousness”** means, for even though we hear the word a lot in church, it’s often misinterpreted. Some use it in a negative sense – “*You’re so righteous*” meaning “*You’re puritanical, or narrow-minded, or even self-righteous.*” That’s not what Jeremiah has in mind. Then, too, some use it in a moral sense. It sounds kind of old-fashioned, but if they call someone “*righteous*” they mean the person is very ethical, follows the law, does good things, even above and beyond the call of duty. They might say, “*Look at Mother Teresa or Billy Graham. Now there’s a righteous person!*” But that’s not what Jeremiah has in mind, either. Or the Bible as a whole. In the truest sense, **“righteousness”** isn’t about behavior – good, bad, or indifferent. It’s about relationship. Specifically, **“righteousness”** means having a right relationship with God.

Now, some might question this. *It's not about behavior at all?* And they would have a point. For behavior can certainly affect a relationship, can't it? Even more, behavior can break a relationship. But the thing is: once broken, behavior cannot fix a relationship. No matter how penitent the offender might be, doing this, doing that, cannot undo what's been done. No matter how diligent the offender might be, doing this, doing that, cannot earn the relationship back. In this respect, the offender is powerless. It's up to the offended – the injured party – to decide whether the relationship can be fixed, and specifically, that depends on whether the offended chooses to forgive. This is true in human relationships, and it's important to understand this about our relationship with God!

Just to illustrate: Lately, there has been a lot in the news about the up-coming trial of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – the man who claims he masterminded the 9/11 terrorist attacks. So imagine that his trial is underway, and all of a sudden he stands up and announces: *I have seen the error of my ways. I am so sorry for what I have done. I repent with all my heart. From now on, I am going to spend my life doing good deeds.* And imagine he is sincere – so sincere that he breaks down in tears. So what would all this gain him? Perhaps some newspaper headlines. Perhaps the sympathy of the crowd. But as for the judge and jury, could this or anything he might do from now on undo what he did? And even if they were really softhearted, could this or anything he might do from now on change his guilt under the law? Certainly not! A pardon could do that. A reprieve could do that. Forgiveness, in other words. But as for anything *he* might do, no amount of penitence, no amount of good deeds, could earn him such a break. In this respect, the offender would be powerless.

Well, the same is true for all of us in our relationship with God – or it would be if we didn't have a Savior. And I mention this to emphasize why we need a Savior. The truth is: all of us break God's Law. All of us stand guilty under the Law. We don't have to be as notorious as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Sin is sin. The law is the law. Whether we break it a little or a lot, that's a problem – and there are consequences. Short-term, we know the consequences all too well. People get hurt. Life gets messed up. God gave His law to prevent that, so when His law is broken, consequences happen. That much is obvious. But breaking God's law also breaks our relationship with Him, and the consequences of that are far worse. Unless our relationship with God gets fixed, there'll be no going to heaven, that's for sure. Just the opposite. And that's the verdict on every human being – or, it *would* be if we didn't have a Savior.

But the good news is that God decided to remedy the situation. The only question was how to do it. He knew we couldn't fix the relationship. We're the offender. So, as God considered our plight, there were no easy options.

Some might think: *Couldn't God just let us off, saying, "Oh, that's okay."* Actually, no, He couldn't, because sin is never okay. Sin hurts people. Sin hurts us. It's a violation of God's justice, holiness, and love. Can you imagine a human judge

letting off Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, saying, “*Oh, that’s okay*”? Not really. On many levels, that would be so wrong! And for God to do that would have been equally wrong. For God, it could never have been an option to just let sin slide.

But by the same token, God could never say, “*You messed up. Live with the consequences!*” On many levels, that, too, would have been wrong! That would have been a violation of God’s love. And His mercy. And His faithfulness. So for God, it could never have been an option to just leave us in our sin.

So what option did that leave? As the offended, only God could fix the relationship. And even *though* offended, God *wanted* to fix the relationship. But the way He fixed it could not suggest that sin doesn’t matter. The way He fixed it had to show that even though sin matters, we matter more. This meant something had to be done to atone for our sins. Someone had to take the punishment to pay for our sins. And since we could not do it for ourselves, that Someone had to be God. He had to pay the price – for us, as one of us. He had to take the punishment – in our place, as a human being. He had to make us right with Himself. In fact, He had to be our righteousness. And that was the option God chose.

We all know the rest of the story. The child born at Bethlehem was God in the flesh. The man nailed to the cross was God in our place. As Jesus, God the offended took our sins upon Himself. As Jesus, God the offended made full atonement. As Jesus, God the offended chose to forgive us, and chose to forgive us in a way that left no room for doubt that while sin matters, we matter more. In fact, we matter so much to God that He chose to save us by grace alone. We didn’t have to contribute even the tiniest bit to our salvation. We didn’t and we can’t. If we are right with God, it is entirely His doing. Entirely His doing! We are saved because “**the LORD is our righteousness.**”

And that’s the Gospel, isn’t it? We human beings need a Savior. God the Son came to be our Savior. “**The LORD is our righteousness.**” And as we begin the season of Advent, I can think of no better way to prepare for Christmas than to focus as fully possible on this great truth. In ages past, this truth may have seemed obvious – “Of course we need a Savior! Of course we need to be saved by grace!” But today? Well, let’s just say it bears repeating.

Today, many celebrating Christmas seem to forget this truth. Indeed, our society seems bent on making sure we forget this truth; making sure Christmas is about everything but the need for a Savior. I suppose that’s to be expected. On the one hand, so many *under*-estimate the problem of sin. They either redefine it or treat it like no big deal. So why would they see the need for a Savior? On the other hand, many *over*-estimate their ability to save themselves. They figure basically they’re good people, basically they live a good life, and if they do some good works, basically they should be covered. So again, why would they see the need for a Savior? But if that’s to be expected from society, that’s all the more

reason for *us* to keep Christmas about Christ – in our homes, to keep Christ front and center; in our minds, to focus on why we *do* need Him; and in our hearts to rejoice in the good news that we’ve not been left to save ourselves, that “**the LORD is our righteousness.**”

Yes, that’s all the more reason to keep Christmas about Christ – and Advent is meant to help us do just that. Let the world turn the next four weeks into a frenzied chaos! We don’t have to buy into that. Instead, we can pace ourselves, pick and choose what we want to do, and take time for spiritual preparation. That’s what Advent is for. Let the world drive itself nuts with shopping and parties and programs! We can carve out time to be still before God, to reflect, to pray – to reduce our stress, not increase it. That’s what Advent is for. Let the world compete to see who can send the most cards, who can bake the most cookies, who can put up the most lights, who can spend the most money buying presents nobody needs. We can focus on the gift everybody needs. As we light each Advent candle, we can reflect on God’s faithful love; we can revel in His gift of a Savior. That’s what Advent is for. In short, the world can have its priorities. We can have ours. And come Christmas, we can see who’s in better shape! But more to the point, come Christmas we can be ready – ready in here [*heart!*] Ready to sing “*Joy to the World, the Lord is come!*” – and really mean it! “*Joy the world*” and joy in the depths of our souls, because the time we will have spent in prayer and reflection will give us a richer, fuller sense of what it means that “**the LORD is our righteousness.**”

That *is* what Advent is for, so let’s make the most of the Advent season – beginning today. There is no greater blessing than our relationship with God – a blessing that will last for all eternity. And we wouldn’t have this blessing were it not for the Savior whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. So whether or not we get our lights up, our cards sent, our cookies baked, let’s focus on what matters most. Let’s keep Advent about preparation. Let’s keep Christmas about Christ. And let’s treasure what it means that “**the LORD is our righteousness.**” Amen.