

You Are to Name Him Jesus
Matthew 1:21
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2010
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In written Chinese, two characters create the concept we call "crisis." The two Chinese characters are *wei*, which means danger, and *ji*, which means chance or opportunity. In every crisis, there is danger, but there is also opportunity.

The year 2010 has certainly been a year of crises.

One in four homeowners—nearly 11 million households nationwide—are under water on their mortgages: they owe more than their homes are now worth. It's easy to see that the housing crisis is full of fear and danger; it hasn't been so easy to see the opportunity in the crisis. The American dream has become, for many, a nightmare.

Another crisis is the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church that surfaced again this past year, this time as an international crisis. The press reported criticism aimed against the highest level of authority, the Pope. The sex abuse by clergy and the cover-up by the church has become more than an "American problem."

A humanitarian crisis has exploded in places like Somalia. War, with factions fighting among themselves without a central government for 10 years, has put the displaced people at risk for getting no food, water, or medical supplies. Between war coupled with drought, Somalia is in major crisis.

We've watched the crises in Haiti after the January earthquake and in Pakistan after the July floods, and now we read that due to the economic crisis that impacts everyone, international humanitarian giving is down. How will we respond to the dangers?

Where is the opportunity in the crisis?

During the Christmas season at another Methodist church, a story was told about an African village. The villagers held fast to their tradition that if one of them was in danger, all the people in the village would stop what they were doing and come to help.

One of the men in the community built a new house high on a hill above the village. He could look down and see the long, winding river flowing beside the village in the valley. One day while working outside, the man glanced down and noticed that far in the distance the river was rushing faster than usual and wildly overflowing its banks. He knew that when the river reached the village, it would flood and the people would drown.

The man shouted down to the people as loudly as he could, but they couldn't hear him. He didn't have time to go all the way down into the village to warn them: "They must start for higher ground right away!" he thought. His mind raced, and he realized he could do only

one thing. He could count on the people to follow their tradition—*when one of us is in trouble, we all stop whatever we are doing and go immediately to help*. So the man set fire to his own new house on the hill.

One of the people down in the village looked up and saw the fire, and called to the others. Everyone climbed to the top of the hill to help the man whose house was burning, and all the people in the village were saved from drowning in the flood (*Manger and Mystery* by Marilyn Brown Oden, 80).

This story shows us that we need to be aware of our surroundings. We need to pay attention to the needs of others. We need to learn other people's customs. We need to speak a language of love, perhaps in a second language, one that will be understood by people in need. We need to be willing to sacrifice for the needs of others. We need to be ready to seize the opportunity in a crisis. We need to respond to God's call in the situations of our lives.

Mary answered the call to give birth. Joseph answered the call to accompany Mary and to name the baby Jesus.

All the characters in the story received a call from God to name this baby holy, to name him "Messiah."

They named him Jesus by their actions in the moment—The shepherds watched the sky and saw the light and heard the angels' voices. Then "they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger" (Luke 2:16),

And the Magi, the wise ones from the East, they too left everything when they saw the star. They seized the opportunity and were willing to take on the dangers of a long journey and perhaps hostile encounters with foreign rulers. It seems they were following God's call.

And then as they left the manger, they went home by another route. They wanted to protect and honor this child born to be King. They had a new purpose. With new meaning they returned to their homes.

I wonder if you look back at this year, is there a crisis that defines the year for you? Was this the year that you lost your home, or your job? Was this the year your sister died, or your brother? Or your mother or father? Or your spouse? Was this the year you had a personal health crisis? (Or someone dear to you had a personal health crisis?)

Or maybe this was a year you were thankfully between crises—perhaps it was a good year, a calm year. Perhaps it was the year your grandchild was born, the year you took an amazing vacation, the year you started college, or the year your cancer went into remission.

God calls us in our crises to make the most of the situations of our lives. Whether it's an unplanned pregnancy, a time of political unrest, a period of unemployment, a changing relationship, or a natural disaster. We can find in our faith a response that leads us out of

danger and into opportunity. We can find a response to God's call, when our eyes are open to the needs of others, and when our ears are tuned to the angels' song, when our hearts are ready to love.

This is how we are to name Jesus, in our response to the situations of our lives. The manger is not the final destination, for we go back to the fields if we are shepherds, and back to the long camel trek home if we are wise men. We flee to Egypt if we are Mary or Joseph in danger of losing the precious child under Herod's rule. We go back to our jobs and our homes and our relationships. There is more to be done. Like Joseph, we name the child Jesus at the manger each year on Christmas Eve, and we continue to name him Jesus in the way we live throughout the year.

On this night long ago, Christ came to be with us, Emmanuel, which means "God with us"—May God be with you—this night and always. Amen.