

## The Holy Name of Jesus

January 1, 2017

Numbers 6:22-17; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

January 1<sup>st</sup> is set aside for the celebration of the Holy Name of Jesus. When that feast falls on a Sunday, it takes precedence over the Sunday readings. So today, we have readings about the names of God and Jesus – blessing in the name of God in the first reading, celebration of God's name in the psalm, the exaltation of Jesus' name in the Philippians reading and the recounting of the naming of the child in the Gospel.

Names in the Old Testament were crucially important. Think for a minute about the name of God, YHWH, which was never pronounced even when it was written in the Hebrew scriptures. Names were seen as the essence of the person – we've lost that a bit, I think, when children are often named for soap or movie stars, or other celebrities. But, especially in the OT, uses of the word "name" are all essentially related to the essence of the person. It was thought that the name revealed the character. So, character, reputation, fame, and even the word "glory" have to do with coming to understand the essence of the person or, in this case, God.

You'll remember when Joy preached that wonderful sermon a couple of weeks ago about the names that Mary and Joseph were to give the child: Jesus, which means Savior, for he will save his people from their sins, and Emmanuel, which means God with us. You'll remember that Mary and Joseph didn't pick the name; they were told what the name was to be by an angel, in both cases. God was naming this child and the naming was part of the great unfolding of God's plan of salvation.

Looking first at the OT, I already mentioned the Numbers reading in which God's name has to do both with identifying the Israelites as his people and with his blessing upon them. We sometimes forget that Mary and Joseph and Paul, two of whose writings we have this morning, could have been considered OT people. The OT was their scripture and it would have formed their understanding of God. So, when we get to the Luke reading, it's important to note that Mary and Joseph are obeying the Mosaic Law, as all good Jews would have done. They present the child at the temple, have him circumcised in accordance with the law as a sign of his membership in the Jewish community and give him the name as the angels had instructed. I don't think there are any Christians these days who don't know that Jesus was Jewish but it's clear from what we know as the New Testament that Jesus and his followers were faithful to the Jewish law – not only obeying the laws, but observing the rituals, worshipping at the temple. It should also be noted that Jesus' followers in the early Christian community not only existed in the name of Jesus, but saw that name as powerful – they forgave sins and healed in his name and said that prayers prayed in Jesus' name would be granted. It probably goes without saying that using Jesus' name wasn't some kind of magic incantation – using his name was to be the result of walking in his footsteps, having put on his mind and praying in accord with his heart.

So, what's in a name? I've already mentioned that we seem to take naming less seriously today, but it certainly has been the case and is sometimes true today that the dreams and hopes and expectations of the parents would be embedded in the name given. It was my experience that that was often true of names given to children in the south which were often

family names. And you'll remember the Puritans who named their children after the virtues they hoped they would emulate: so you had Faith, Hope, Charity or Prudence. And perhaps it's unfortunate that we have lost that. Peter Gomes tells of meeting Charles Francis Adams who was a descendent of the Adams family. Gomes asked him what it was like to bear such a famous name and Mr. Adams replied quite simply, "It's a lifetime job." He went on to recall a conversation he had with his father upon his graduation from Harvard in 1932 when, he said, his father looked him in the eye and said, "You have inherited a great reputation for truth: God help you if you lose it."

Names, even if they weren't given thoughtfully, are still wrapped up with our identity. There's the story, again from Harvard, about the student who was taking a test when the proctor called time. The student continued to write feverishly until the proctor lost all patience and demanded that the student come up and present his blue book. The fellow came forward, drew himself up to his full dignity and said, "Do you know who I am?" And the proctor, offended by the implication of social status in the question, responded by saying, "No, I don't, and what's more I don't care!" "Great," said the student with a big grin, throwing his exam book down on the pile where its anonymity would mean he was off the hook.

Questions of identity. "Who are you" can be seen as a trite conversation starter or a deep question about identity. Who do you think you are...? Jesse Jackson has pointed out that the greatest cause of social decay in America is not racism, or poverty, not drugs or violence. They are all symptoms of a deeper problem which is a lack of self-worth, a lack of an identity worth respecting, a lack of self-respect and self-dignity, which comes from not knowing who we really are. We get caught, he thinks, in our circumstances, or the things by which others define us: by our age or our race or our poverty or our bank account or our jobs or by our limitations. But the Good News of the Gospel is that our circumstances need not define us. If we can answer that question, WHO ARE YOU with Paul's words in Galatians – answer as someone who can call God "Abba, Father"; if we can know ourselves as a son or daughter of God and a follower of Christ; if we can know the purpose of our life is the purpose and praise of God, then we know who we are. We are not bound then, or limited by our experience but can, instead, aspire to a fullness of life and joy; we can aspire to a life which somehow, in spite of all the disparate pieces, can come to something greater than the sum of the parts. Someone has said that "every child born into the world is a new thought of God, an ever fresh and radiant possibility."

Every child is a child of God. But we've taken on another name as well, when we call ourselves Christians. We've committed ourselves to following Christ, to live those lives that show forth God's glory, God's face, God's love to all the world. I recently saw the TAP production of the Christmas Carol told from the point of view of Jacob Marley. It was so good, I went back a second time to take notes for sermon material. At the beginning, Marley is standing before an in-take worker somewhere in eternity. The fellow pulls out a contract (a very long one) and says that Marley simply hasn't lived up to his contract. But then he suggests that Marley try again. "Let's see if we can't do a little better, shall we?" he intones in a suspiciously British accent. At one point, when Marley has figured out that he needs to open his heart wide enough to save Scrooge, he laments that he's OLD, and because of that he can't change. But, of course, he

does, and comes to see Scrooge as a vulnerable human being and, when he sees that, his chains drop away and he himself is “saved.” One message was that it’s never too late for transformation, never too late to change, never too late to let in the light, never too late to break open our hearts. Never too late to claim our identity as a child of God and then live it out. So, what’s in a name? Pretty much everything. Amen.