

**Holy Name**  
**Numbers 6:22-27; Luke 2:15-21**

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**January 1, 2017**

Happy New Year!

Our culture has taken New Year's Day as a time to consider resolutions on how we might do better in the upcoming calendar year. The resolutions we make to eat more healthy food, to exercise more, stop smoking – we are asking ourselves who we are and committing ourselves to who we want to be. New Year's is an annual exercise in identity crisis. In our lesson from the Old Testament, the people whom God had freed from slavery in Egypt have come to the end of their 40 years of wandering in the desert and they take on a new identity. They are preparing to leave the Sinai and cross into the Holy Land. As they near the Jordan River and prepare to cross it and claim what God has promised them, God pauses them and bestows a blessing on them. He gives the words to a blessing that will be repeated by the priests, so that the People will remember who they are:

‘The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,  
 The LORD bless you and keep you;  
 the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.  
 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.’  
 (Numbers 6:22-27)

God put HIS name on the people when he called them, “Israel.” He consecrated them. He blessed them. He gave them his name, which was a promise. God promised this people that they would be his people and He would be their God: a promise that he would be in a very particular and special relationship with them. These words of blessing were to be spoken over the people daily, to remind them continually of who they were. This blessing, this name shaped all that happened as they entered into the Promised Land. This name, “The People of God,” shaped their history through the ages, into the time of David, into exile and return, and into the time of Roman occupation in the first century. Mary and Joseph carried this blessing upon themselves, part of their identity, as they stepped toward the rabbi in Bethlehem to offer their child for the rite of circumcision – to mark the baby as part of this covenant.

This past week, between Christmas and today, the world seems full of lists: the critic's top ten movies of the year, the best albums, the top news stories, the Billboard top 100, the year in pictures... We also have been looking back at all the celebrities who have died in the past year: icons of our culture who shaped taste, fashion, and entertainment. As with every year, the list included both golden-era greats and those who died far too young. I think we savor these lists because they are a kind of snapshot of who we are in this moment – what has influenced our culture and how we see ourselves. 2016 was a very strange year and it was common to hear throughout December, “oh, just let it be over!” or “Good riddance, 2016!” I take such talk as a cry for change. The problem is, we are the ones who make our times – it is not just a phenomenon foisted upon us. Maybe a child can make a claim to its elders, “what has your generation done to the world?” but by now, we know our times reflect who we are - it really is us – it is our identity. History is a harsh critic: it will either forget us or we will do something so massively stupid that it will never be able to forget us. But perhaps there is another choice – is it too late? Who are we and what mark do we want to make in this world?

Today we are celebrating not just the New Year, we are celebrating the Feast of the Holy Name. We are on the eighth day of Christmas. A baby was born in Bethlehem and it is time to present him at the Synagogue as is the custom. As St. Luke tells us, “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child.” Part of that Jewish circumcision ceremony was and still is to name the child. This is a very important moment for the child, its family, and its community. The name of a baby reflects so much: hope for the future, tradition, genealogy,

history – a name is in many a ways a parent’s prayer for the life of their child. This particular baby was particularly important and his name would have meaning and power that would define its times and change and challenge the world ever after. His parents, Mary and Joseph, stepped forward with a secret in each of their hearts – they had a name for this child, “the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” We can imagine the pause as the rabbi asked, “What do you name this child?” The question at that moment really was, “WHO is this child?” What will his name mean to the world? How will it shape or mark him? Who is he?

“He was called Jesus...the name chosen by God for him and announced by the angels to Mary and Joseph, which means, “God saves.” The direction of history turned on this pivot point. A new name redefined the relationship between God and His people. “God saves” is a different kind of promise, it is an invitation for all who hear the name “Jesus” to turn toward it, to lean into it, to let it change everything. The name “Jesus” is an open invitation: This is the consecration of all people, through this name. It is personal – each individual who encounters this name is invited into a new identity, into a relationship with a God who calls them into a New Covenant based upon salvific love. The name, “Jesus,” invites us to be even more that the “People of God,” we are each invited to be a beloved child of God.

My thought for this New Year’s Day for each of us is that I want us to cancel every impulse to make resolutions – the resolutions that are doomed to fail: I’m going to diet and lose 20 pounds, I’m going to exercise every day, I’m going to quit ----- fill in the blank – you know what it is for you. Your resolution is probably a good one but let’s face it the statistics are grim when it comes to actually fulfilling a New Year’s resolution, so let’s just “NOT.” We do have a choice about how we move through our times - the mark we make as part of our generation, in our times. Do you have concerns about your health and habits? Don’t put your faith in the diet and exercise gurus of the day: call on the Holy Name of Jesus and make it the center of who you are: a beloved child of God. Let that inform every decision about yourself and the way you approach the future. We can be kinder to ourselves knowing that we are redeemed. We can choose our actions out of a place of deep, holy love for ourselves and for others.

I invite you to whisper the name, “Jesus” when you think of yourself – before you begin to berate yourself for being the “not-quite-there” that your resolution was about. “Jesus. God saves,” let THAT inform the way you think about yourself, let it shape who you are in 2017 and beyond. Let the name “Jesus” bless you and remind you constantly of who you are.

Amen.