

Sermon preached at 12:00 Noon at Grace Church, Russell Road in Alexandria, VA on January 1, 2019
1 Christmas-The Holy Name; Year A (RCL): Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So, what's in a Name?

In this life that I share with Chrissie, my wife, she is Chris-Miss, but perhaps more importantly, she is Heart Of My Heart (which comes from the final verse of Hymn 488, "Be Thou My Vision"). And I am, to Chrissie, her Beloved, for that is the etymology of my name David; the purpose which I am called to share with her.

In the Book of Genesis, and throughout the rest of Scripture, names have been changed to reflect new identities and purposes. Abram became Abraham and Sarai, Sarah. Jacob became Israel, 'one who struggled with God,' after his wrestling match at the River Jabbok with the holy stranger. In the New Testament, Saul, persecutor of the fledgling Christian movement, is knocked from his horse and blinded on the road to Damascus; he became Paul, an advocate for the risen Christ. Simon became Peter, the Rock upon which the Church is built.

From the beginning of creation, names have been given the highest importance. They are more than just words. For us, they often convey a person's place and purpose in the world.

Even as Chrissie and I grow in our marriage which celebrates 38 years tomorrow (I love you, sweetheart!), bringing forth no children of our own, we are accustomed to welcoming four-legged animals to fill our home and warm our hearts. And when we began, for the most part, we developed our own tradition of "claiming and renaming" through adoption:

- Valentine became Lazarus (revived when he didn't go to a different home)
- Dilly became Gili (which in Hebrew means, 'my joy, my happiness')

Another example comes from one of those movies that I watch again and again. It is "Hidden Figures," the story of three brilliant African-American women at NASA who served as some of the brains behind the successful launch of John Glenn into orbit, which ultimately restored our nation's confidence in reaching for the stars and beyond. Names play an important role in this movie where how you address someone shows respect and/or intimacy. In this movie, names definitely have importance and carry weight.

Today has long been celebrated as a principal Feast Day of the Church: what we call the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In ancient Jewish tradition, the male child was circumcised and named on the 8th day of their life. This ritual, chronicled in the 17th chapter of Genesis, was and is, considered a sign of the covenant between God and God's people, dating back to the time of the patriarch Abraham, about 1800 years before Jesus.

Traces of this naming ritual were retained in Christendom. In our historical baptismal liturgy, the priest would ask the godparents to “Name this child” before the water bath. It might seem odd to us, but at least as far as religious institutions were concerned, children had no name or identity before this official naming ritual. Interestingly, this is no longer a part of our liturgy following the 1979 prayer book revision. Baptism is now celebrated as a welcoming sacrament, not a naming ceremony. We clergy might still request a child’s name be stated, if for no other reason than to make sure we have the name in our minds. I have done this myself for most, but not all, baptisms in my former parish.

Of course, nowadays, parents are more inclined to choose names for their children even before birth. And there’s nothing wrong with that. A child’s identity is formed very early for us because names are important to us ~ culturally, religiously, individually, and personally.

And so, too, with Jesus.

The name Jesus, in Hebrew ‘Yeshua,’ means “God saves.”

This Jesus, good above all other, was not simply named to establish his cultural heritage as a dark-skinned Palestinian Jew. He was not named primarily to identify him to God, since he came from God and he is God. He was named Jesus to provide us an example to follow, a leader to emulate, and a way ~ The Way ~ for us to move ever closer to divine goodness, grace, and mercy.

Jesus, the Son of God, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. “Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ...” (Philippians 2:9-10.)

In this world so afflicted by hostility, in this age so plagued by divisiveness, and in this time so overwhelmed by name-calling, the name of our Lord Jesus provides an antidote to hatred, a cure to violence, and a balm for pain.

For Jesus is the salvation of the world. In his name, we minister to the world around us. His name is the name into which we are baptized, not our own. We are claimed, named, forgiven, renewed, strengthened, and made members of the priestly Body of Christ, the Church. In Grace, by Grace, and through Grace and the Holy Spirit, we are adopted.

Yet at times, it can be difficult to remember that God is with us. We rush about, being monopolized by work or school, in traffic, at home, etc. Before we realize it, we find that everything is just busy and rushed until it all becomes a blur.

And then we stop. If. We. Can. Stop. Stopping to take a moment to recognize what else is around us. Maybe even stopping to think about God with us, that we are not alone, which is an essential practice of the Christian life we are baptized into and called to walk. Without it, God becomes a stranger to us, and whenever we might come across the beauty, hope, or compassion of our Creator,

we can miss out on seeing God. But God on earth is no stranger—we even know his name! The holy Name of Jesus.

Today is a new day and as we begin another year, we are invited to remember that God is not far from us. Because of the Incarnation of Christ Jesus in this world, we know God and God knows us. In our humanness. We remember that we, too, share in making God's name known throughout the world. So how will you listen for God today? And When? When will you make God present to someone else? And How?

What makes us stop in any given situation? Often, it is because someone calls us by name. Isn't this what grabs our attention? Think about how Mary Magdalene's sorrow at finding the tomb empty after Jesus' crucifixion was instantly changed to joy when Jesus called her by name and she recognized her risen Lord.

I want to share a poem that Chrissie, Heart Of My Heart, found. It's titled "When I Need Reminding," by Christina Rees¹:

Lord, remind me who I am.
When others tell me I am nothing,
Remind me that I have been made in God's image.
When my body has been used and abused,
Remind me that I am the temple of your Holy Spirit.
When I am accused of things I have done and have not done,
Remind me that you do not condemn me.
When people tell me that I will never amount to anything,
Remind me that I am crowned with your glory and honor.
When I am treated as a slave,
Remind me that in you I am totally free.
When I cannot see any way ahead,
Remind me that I carry your light within me.
When I am afraid or confused,
Remind me that I have your power, your love and your sanity.
When I feel of no use and no worth,
Remind me that I am precious to you, that you call me your beloved.
When I have been betrayed or abandoned,
Remind me that nothing can ever take your love away from me.
When I forget who I am,
Call me by my name.

¹ [1] When I Need Reminding, Christina Rees, Barley, Royston, Hertfordshire, England: Lifting Women's Voices: Prayers to Change the World. by Margaret Rose, Jenne Person, Abigail Nelson, and Jenny Te Paa, eds. Domestic and Foreign Mission Society, Morehouse Publishing, New York, 2009.

All of us together, as ordinary people with ordinary flesh, are made holy by the God that was born to us in a stable so long ago. One Christmas Eve a few years ago at the Pageant, Randy Alexander+, my rector at Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill, asked us to pinch some skin on our hand, to remember that the flesh we wear is the flesh that Jesus wore. The very presence of God among us in the name of Jesus has made the ordinary holy. Every male Jew was circumcised and formally named on the eighth day of their life. So already in his youth, Jesus bore the mark of a covenant that he would make new through the shedding of his blood on the cross. That covenant, like Jesus' name, is a gift that marks all children of God; All of us.

As we begin yet another ordinary year in this Holy Name of Jesus, let us pray that God will make our ordinary year Holy, and that we seek to find God this year in the ordinary. May we be moved in the Name of Jesus to work for justice, peace, and love for all; for the poor, the persecuted, the marginalized and the oppressed, here in our own nation and abroad. And may we see God in our ordinary neighbors, always remembering the name of Jesus makes the ordinary Holy.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.