

Sermon for The Solemnity of The Holy Name

January 1, 2023

“The Name that Matters”

Text: Luke 2:15-21; Philippians 2:5-11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What’s in a name? Quite a lot, actually. Names are important. Names give meaning to things. I don’t know if other animals name things, but it is a fundamental characteristic of us human beings to give names to everything in our world. We name plants, we name animals, we name things in the sky, we name things we can’t see, and we name each other. It is an ancient practice that continues to this very day in most cultures that babies are given names that bear some meaning. American culture has a variety of ways of picking names for children. These days it often comes down to what’s popular, what sounds good, favorite names of the parents, maybe honoring a relative, and *sometimes* it has to do with what the name means. Most cultures around the world are intentional about the meaning of the name, because the name will define the identity of the child. Names in scripture are chosen very carefully to represent some characteristic of the individual. Perhaps it was a physical characteristic, like Esau, which means ‘hairy.’ The name could represent an important event in the baby’s life, like Moses (Mosheh in Hebrew) who was pulled from the river and rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter; his name was derived from the verb *mashah*, which means drawn out from water. At the Annunciation according to St. Luke, the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that she was to bear a son and he would be named Jesus. And the Gospel lesson tonight tells us that “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” You should remember last week, we heard the Annunciation story according to St. Matthew that was given to Joseph. It was important for Joseph to give Jesus his name in order to adopt him into his family, heritage, and lineage. That linked Jesus to the Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs, and most importantly, to King David and Zadok the ancient High Priest, thereby making Jesus of Nazareth heir to the kingship of Israel and the high priesthood of the Temple. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the *Christos* (Christ), the eternal king and high priest.

Jesus is the English pronunciation of the Latinized form, Iesus, which comes from Iesous, which is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yehoshu’a. Yehoshu’a means “Yahweh is salvation” or “God saves.” Yehoshu’a was a very common name in biblical times and is common today; in English, the name is rendered as Joshua.

In the Bible, Joshua was the successor to Moses, who led the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to salvation in the promised land. Joshua took up the mantle from Moses and continued to lead God’s saved people in the land they were promised. Yeshu’a ha’Nazari or Yeshu’a min-Nazaret, which was Jesus’ name in Aramaic/Hebrew, took up the mantle of the ancient patriarchs and prophets and led all humanity to eternal salvation through his death on the Cross and his resurrection. The name of Jesus was no accident; there was no confusion about his name or his purpose on earth.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, said that the name of Jesus was above every other name. He quoted the words of one of the earliest hymns of Christianity: “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” In other words, Jesus could have exploited his divine power to make the world submit to divine rule. He could have zapped the Jews who convicted him into oblivion. He could have destroyed Romans who crucified him. He could have walked away from the Cross and seized his divinity, but he was too powerful to submit to that kind of temptation. Instead he lived out every molecule of his human nature, including that most mortal of states—death. God in Jesus the Christ, humbled himself as a human, so that he could take humanity by the hand, lift us up and bring us closer to God in his divinity. “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, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Today, we have come to celebrate the name of Jesus. This is the Feast or Solemnity of the Holy Name. Until the 1979 BCP, it was known as the Feast of the Circumcision. Circumcision is an ancient cardinal practice of Judaism; it was what separated Jewish men from men of every other culture of the time; circumcision is what gave men their Jewish identity, and it happened eight days after their birth. The circumcision was also the time when Jewish men were officially named. The celebration of the Circumcision of Jesus began in the early church, and in the year 567 the Council of Tours declared January 1 as the day of its celebration to counter pagan celebrations of the new year. The practice of naming on the eighth day is still done today in Judaism. We do the same thing symbolically at baptism when the priest says to the parents, “Name this child.” We name the child, baptize her or him, make the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead, and mark him or her as Christ’s own forever. We give the child their Christian identity. Your name is what gives you your individual identity.

So what does the name of Jesus mean for us as Christians? It means hope. It means confidence. It means love. It means salvation. Yehoshu’a, Yahweh saves—God saves. The name reaches back to the patriarchs of old to remind us of God’s saving acts in history, and it foreshadows the salvation that we will enjoy at the end of our days. Remember, the story of the Nativity is the story of God becoming flesh and living among us, in the midst of and in spite of the chaos of the world and its powers. The name of Jesus means that we have nothing to fear. When the negative, dark, or evil forces confront us in life, we can stand firm on the name of Jesus and press on. The simplest prayer we can pray is the Jesus prayer: Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. The name of Jesus means that we can overcome all that life throws at us. The name of Jesus means that we can rejoice at God’s blessings in our lives. The name of Jesus means that we can glorify God at all times and in all places. What does the name of Jesus mean for you?

As we enter 2023, let us go forth with the confidence that we have the name of Jesus in our hearts and minds to make it through another year that God has blessed us to see. Let us rejoice in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Resources

<https://modernmetanoia.org/2016/12/19/holy-name-whats-in-a-name/>

Feast of the Holy Name, http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1254?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=the-feast-of-the-holy-name

“The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/holy-name-our-lord-jesus-christ>

Strong's Hebrew: 4872 (Mosheb), <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/4872.htm>