

Sermon for The Holy Name
December 31, 2016 & January 1, 2017
“What’s in a name?”

Text: Luke 2:15-21

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

“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.”

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. Names in scripture, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, names are chosen to represent some characteristic of the individual: it could be a physical characteristic—like Esau, which means ‘hairy’, or an important event in the baby’s life—like Moses (Moishe) which means ‘drawn out’, because he was drawn out of the water. Names were also given to impart a prediction or foreshadowing of the life of the baby.

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. Many cultures around the world are very intentional about the meaning of the name, because the name will define the identity of the child. This was common for those of Hebrew origin in Biblical times. Names were intentionally chosen for their meaning. Moses (Mosheh in Hebrew) was pulled from the river by Pharaoh’s daughter; his name was derived from the verb *mashah*, which means drawn out from water. At the Annunciation, the Archangel Gabriel told Mary that she was to bear a son and he would be named Jesus. Actually, Jesus is the Latinized form of the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Yeshu’a. It means “God saves.” It was a very common name at the time, but in this case, it was divinely chosen and was connected to the child’s past and future.

Joshua was the successor to Moses. He took up the mantle from Moses in leading the Hebrews following the Exodus. For the Hebrew people, the Jews, the Exodus was the pivotal event of salvation from slavery in Egypt. The Exodus represented the move from enslavement in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah was to take up the mantle of the patriarchs and prophets and lead 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 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 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.”

This evening, we have come to celebrate the name of Jesus. This is the Feast of the Holy Name. It is also known as the Feast of the Circumcision. Circumcision is an ancient cardinal practice of Judaism; it is 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. This practice is still done today. The circumcision is also the time when Jewish men were officially named. We do the same thing symbolically at baptism when the priest says to the parents, “Name this child.” We name the child, baptism 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 his/her Christian identity. Our own name is what gives us our individual identity.

So what does the name of Jesus mean for us? It means hope. It means confidence. It means love. It means salvation. Yeshua, God saves. The name reaches back to the patriarchs of old to remind us of God's saving acts of God 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.

As we move from 2016 and enter 2017, 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

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