

## Sermon Feast of the Holy Name

### Year A

[RCL] Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

#### The Name Given by an Angel

This day that our society celebrates as the beginning of a new year has not always been so. Although the Gregorian calendar established January 1 as new year's day as far back as 1582, in England it was not until 1752 that it replaced March 25 as the beginning of the new year. March 25, of course, is when the church celebrates the feast of the Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the Christ child.

And today has long been celebrated as another principal feast day of our Lord: what today we call the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In ancient Jewish tradition, a child was circumcised and named on the eighth day of life. This ritual was—and is—considered a sign of the covenant between God and his people, dating back to the time of the patriarch Abraham, about 1800 years before Christ—as documented in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis.

And vestiges of this naming ritual were retained in Christendom. In our historical baptismal liturgy, the priest would ask the parents and godparents to “name this child” before the water bath. It may seem odd to us, but—at least as far as religious institutions were concerned—children had no name at all before this official ritual naming.

Nowadays, of course, parents often choose names for their children even *before* birth. And there's nothing wrong with that. For names are important to us—culturally, religiously, and individually.

Culturally, names can establish a kind of social location or ethnic heritage. Think of Seamus (“Shaymus”), which stems from the ancient Celts, or Ashanti, which has African origins. One can be named for an iconic figure, or for a beloved elderly relative. Our names provide one clue to the time and place of our birth in the great narrative of humanity.

Religiously, names provide a means of identifying us before God—and identifying us as *equal* in the sight of God. Liturgically, in our prayers, at baptism, at a funeral, and even when addressing a bishop, we use our *first* name—what used to be called our “Christian name.” And this indicates that God knows us intimately, calls us each by name, and loves us all the same—which is to say beyond measure.

And individually, names differentiate us from others. They provide a means for us to be identified in a crowd, a way for us to refer to each other, and a means by which one can establish oneself as unique—by “making a name” for ourselves, as the expression goes.

But what difference does it make? As Shakespeare wrote, “What’s in a name? that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”<sup>1</sup>

The irony in Juliet’s speech, of course, serves to justify why the play *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragedy and not a romantic comedy. Were the lovers not named Capulet and Montague, the end result might have been quite different. Their names *mattered*.

And so, too, with Jesus.

The name *Jesus*, of course, is the Latin form of the Greek *Iesous* (“yeh-soos”), which in turn is the transliteration of the Hebrew *Joshua*, meaning roughly “God is salvation.”

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 was God. And he was not named only to differentiate him from others.

He was named Jesus to provide us with a beacon to follow, a leader to emulate, and a way for us to move ever closer to divine goodness, grace, and mercy.

The way, the truth, and the life: Jesus, the name for which *every* knee should bow—here on earth, up in heaven, and under the earth in the bowels of hell.<sup>2</sup>

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

For Jesus is the salvation of the world. And we minister in his name to the world around us. In our baptism we were claimed, adopted, forgiven, renewed, strengthened, and made members of the priestly Body of Christ, the church.

And we are now empowered to be the sign of God’s love for others. In other words, the name of Jesus is forever sealed upon our hearts. That name of Jesus within us compels us to work for justice, peace, and love for all. And the name of Jesus gives us the will and the strength to persevere in this most daunting ministry of reconciliation.

All of this we do in the name of Jesus—our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.

He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. He *is* called Jesus, meaning God is salvation. And he will for ever be called Jesus, the king of glory and king of peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* II.ii

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:10

*Written by The Rev. Dr. Barrie Bates. Rev. Bates has served Episcopal and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past two decades. He is currently on short-term disability, recuperating from both Lyme Disease and a double-knee replacement, so he welcomes your e-mail conversation at [revdocbates@gmail.com](mailto:revdocbates@gmail.com).*

*Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.*