



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### The Feast of the Holy Name Year B

#### Names

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

Names can tell us a lot about people's characters and the roles they play in a story.

One of the pleasures of reading literature is discovering the meaning of characters' names. Authors will often give their characters names that tell us something important about who they are and about what they will do in the story. The great master of giving characters names is Charles Dickens. He gives us the policemen, Sharpeye and Quickear; the family physician, Dr. Pilkens; and the surgeon, Dr. Slasher. The Bigwig Family are the stately people in town, Mr. Bounderby is a self-made man and social climber, and the Reverend Mechisedech Howler is a preacher of the Ranting Persuasion.

One of the things that children seem to like about the Harry Potter stories is the names of the characters. They have fun sounds, and their meanings are none too subtle. Severus is a Latin word for "severe" or "strict," and Professor Severus Snape is a strict teacher if ever there was one. "Malfoy" sounds like the French for "bad faith," mal foi; and draco means "snake" or "dragon" in Latin. Put them together and you get Draco Malfoy, a real bad apple. And the headmaster Dumbledore's first name is Albus, which means "white," so we may suppose he is the leader of those on the side of light.

Today in our church calendar we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus. In the New Testament, we are told that God is the one who gives Jesus his name. And in giving Jesus his name, God is telling us something important about Jesus' character and the role he will play in the story of God's love for the world.

In our gospel lesson for today, we hear 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." It was apparently the custom in Jesus' day to name a male child at the time of circumcision, which was the act by which he was made a member of the people of God. That Jesus' parents had him circumcised and named on the eighth day after his birth demonstrates their piety and fidelity to the Law of Moses. The beginning of the story of Jesus is part of the larger, ongoing story of God's love for God's people. Jesus' name tells us about his place in this story.

Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, through the angel Gabriel, God tells Mary that she will conceive and bear a son and that she is to "call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High." In naming Jesus, God is telling us something about who he is. The name "Jesus" is a Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua," which means "the Lord helps" or "the Lord saves." When we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus, we are celebrating the one through whom and in whom the Lord helps or saves his people.

This is a rather audacious name to give to a baby. Since many of us know the end of the story, it may seem less so, but we should not overlook what an extraordinary thing the naming of Jesus is. Before his teaching and preaching, before his healings and miracles, before his death and resurrection, Jesus is already identified by God as the one through whom He will save his people. An 8-day-old baby named Jesus. “He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High.” In the naming of a tiny child, we already catch a glimpse God’s audacious plan to save the world through the gift of a vulnerable human being.

It may surprise many of us to learn that we have also been given an audacious name. The Catechism in older versions of the Book of Common Prayer used to begin with this question: “What is your Name?” After saying your name, you were then asked, “Who gave you this Name?” The answer to this question was to be the following: “My Sponsors in Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” When we were given our names in baptism, we were made a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

Our names, given in baptism, tell us something important about our characters and the roles we are to play in the story of God’s love for the world. Who are we? Most fundamentally, most deeply, we are beloved children of God, members of Christ, and through him heirs of the promised kingdom. How are we to live? We have our roles to play in God’s story of salvation by turning away from evil and wrongdoing, but putting our faith and trust in Christ, by believing in the articles of faith, and by keeping God’s commandments.

Names can tell us a lot about people’s characters and the roles they play in a story. Yes, we are vulnerable human beings with ordinary names like Harry and Sally and Sue. But we have also been given names in baptism that identify us as extraordinary participants in the story of God’s love for the world.

Today we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus. It was given to him when he was eight days old, when he was circumcised and made a member of the people of God. The angel Gabriel told his human parents to name him “Jesus,” which means “the Lord helps” or “the Lord saves.” It tells us that Jesus is the one through whom God’s love will embrace the whole world. This is an extraordinary and audacious name to give to a tiny baby. It is also an extraordinary and audacious plan to save the world through a vulnerable, flesh-and-blood human being. The audacity of God’s plan continues in our own names given in baptism. Those names identify us with Jesus and his story. In his Holy Name, we claim our true identities as children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

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*This sermon, written by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Pagano, originally ran for the Feast of the Holy Name on January 1, 2011.*