



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Feast of the Holy Name

After Eight Days

[RCL]: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

“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.” - Luke 2:21

January 1, the Feast of the Holy Name, is a day when we encounter an interweaving of spiritual traditions: a mystical attachment to the importance of dreams, Jewish tradition and practice, the Christian emphasis on Jesus as fully human and fully divine, and themes of redemption and the power of God’s name. Not to mention the secular customs of New Year’s greeting and resolutions, a cleansing and a hopeful new start.

Let’s go back to Nazareth, to the scene of the Annunciation, where the angel reveals the name of the child Mary is to bear. “The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David” (Luke 1:30-32).

The name *Jesus* comes from the Greek transcription of the Hebrew name Yeshua or Yehoshuah – Joshua. It means, simply, *God saves*. A powerful name indeed.

In Matthew’s gospel, Joseph receives a visit from the angel of the Lord, in a passage sometimes called the Annunciation to Joseph. Joseph, learning that his young fiancée is pregnant, and being a kind man, has resolved not to expose her to public disgrace, but to “dismiss her quietly.” The angel appears to Joseph in a dream and reassures him, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21).

Clearly, this child’s name, “given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb,” is particularly important, for it names his mission on earth: to save God’s people.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer, which is still the authorized version in common use in our Episcopal churches today, observes January 1 as the Feast of the Holy Name. Earlier versions of the Book of Common Prayer, up to and including the 1928 version, observed January 1 as the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ. In the collect for the Holy Name, we pray to God who gave “the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation.” The collect for the Circumcision emphasizes circumcision as a sign of obedience to the law of God, in body and in spirit.

Circumcision of Jewish male babies originates in Genesis 17, as a physical sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. God promises the faithful, elderly, and childless Abram that he will be fruitful, and the ancestor of nations. God’s covenant is to be with Abram’s offspring down through the generations, and as a sign of the covenant, all male children are to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. A naming occurs at the establishment of the covenant: Abram is re-named Abraham. Here is the passage from Genesis 17: 3-7:

Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

Circumcision is a tradition that links the Jewish people to Abraham and Isaac. It is a sacred act that binds Jewish families to the multitude of generations who preceded them—and the generations to follow. The eighth day circumcision ceremony, called the *bris* or *brit milah*, is also a ceremony when the child is given the blessing of a name. Thus, on the occasion of today’s feast day, Jesus is doubly marked. He is circumcised as a sign of God’s faithfulness to God’s people and of his connection to Abraham and his Jewish ancestors. He is named with a name that expresses his nature as the savior sent from God to redeem God’s people.

The circumstances of Jesus’ *bris* were likely to be humble. It’s possible that Joseph performed the circumcision himself. Were they still in the stable or had the family moved to more comfortable accommodations? Wherever they were on the eighth day after Jesus’ birth on December 25, the contrast with the naming of a poor baby boy and the name Paul exalts in the letter to the Philippians is as stark as the contrast between the earthiness and physicality of circumcision, and the mystical, divine nature of Jesus’ name. On this day, we are reminded that Christ is fully human and fully divine. Paul’s theology is explicit. In human form, Christ was humble and obedient to the point of death. At the same time, God

“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” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Since the Holy Name stands as a complete summary of Christ’s nature and God’s mercy, it is particularly powerful as a focus for contemplative prayer. Devotion to the Holy Name began with the apostles and early disciples, as we have seen in the reading from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. By the Middle Ages, mystics such as Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux encouraged adoration of the Holy Name. In the Eastern Church, the Jesus Prayer dates as far back as the fourth century C.E. It appears in the Orthodox *Philokalia* as “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me.” The prayer is said repeatedly, sometimes with the aid of a prayer rope. The knotted prayer rope is similar to rosary beads, and the practice of saying the rosary is similarly contemplative in its repetition. Anglicans and Episcopalians may use the Holy Name or Jesus Prayer while praying with Anglican prayer beads. We say the Jesus Prayer during the Eucharist when we pray the Agnus Dei: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us,” and the Kyrie Eleison: “Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.”

The more you listen for the Holy Name, the more you notice it. Like this, from Psalm 33: 20-21:

Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.
Indeed, our heart rejoices in him,
for in his holy Name we put our trust.

We pray with the Holy Name in intercessory prayer: “In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.” All of these practices connect us with our wider Christian heritage, as Christ’s circumcision and naming on the eighth day connect us with our Jewish roots.

Let us pray:

Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation. Plant in our hearts the love of Jesus, truly God and truly human, and grant that we may praise and bless your Holy Name with our whole mind, heart, body, and spirit, that we may know your boundless compassion and mercy. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

Susan Butterworth, M.A., M.Div, is a writer, teacher, singer, and lay minister. She leads Song & Stillness: Taizé @ MIT, a weekly ecumenical service of contemplative Taizé prayer at the interfaith chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She teaches writing and literature to college undergraduates and writes book reviews, essays, and literary reference articles.