

CHRISTMAS I – HOLY NAME OF JESUS, JANUARY 1, 2023

“What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.” That is what William Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*. He was referring to the idea that names themselves are a convention to distinguish things or people, but themselves do not have any worth or meaning.

With all do respect to Shakespeare names are quite significant and packed with meaning. Our names are an incredibly important part of our identity. They carry deep personal, cultural, familial, and historical connections and can also give us a sense of who we are, the communities in which we belong, and our place in the world.

Today naming a child is still a very important act. We have all observed ourselves and other parents spending hours picking a name for the anticipated child. How many of you know why you were given the name you have. Were you named after a family member? A friend? Was your name just liked by your parents? I remember asking my mom, sometime after my dad had died, why he named me Beverly and she said she didn't know. So, I've always joked I must have been named after one of his former girlfriends.

All this talk about names is because today is not only New Years Day but January 1st is the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. It is also associated with the circumcision of Jesus because on the eighth day after birth, each male child of a Jewish couple was circumcised in remembrance of the covenant God made with Abraham. At this time, a name was given to the child, usually of some family member to be remembered.

For the Jewish people the giving of a name not only had great importance but had great power. When a name was given it represented what that person should be in the future. An unknown name meant that someone could not be completely known. To not acknowledge someone's name meant both denial of the person, destruction of their personality, and change in their destiny. A person's name expressed the reality of his or her being at its deepest level.

The Hebrew people also believed that the sacred name of God was a thing of immense power and so sacred that it could not be spoken. The essence of God's being was carried in a four-letter word, *Yahweh*, that could be recited only by a priest and only on special holy days. Another Hebrew word, *Adonai*, which we translate as “the Lord,” was used to refer to God in everyday discourse. This just shows how sacred names are.

Biblical traditions also have remarkable stories demonstrating the power of naming and even renaming. Throughout scripture we have examples of God recognizing something more in the essence of someone than what their name captures. So, God renames them which marks a dramatic shift in their life's trajectory, a new orientation, a new mission, and a new way of life that is bound in faith. For instance, God renamed Abram and Sarai. The name Abram meant “exalted father,” but God called him Abraham, meaning “the father of nations.” Sarai meant “quarrelsome,” but God called her Sarah, which means “princess.” God took Jacob, which means “heel grabber” and named him Isaac, meaning “the one who struggles with God.” Jesus also renamed Simon, whose name meant “to hear” or “to listen” to Peter which means “rock.” Saul, who was the persecutor of the first followers of Jesus, whose name meant prayed for was given the Greek name Paul which means humble as he was sent to bring the Good News of God's salvation found in Jesus to the Gentiles, who would otherwise remain left out.

Early Christians called upon the name of Jesus Christ for healing and deliverance. Today the church remembers the power of naming when a child is christened at Baptism; not only is the child given its Christian name but from that point on it bears the name, "child of God," which reflects the essence of its true nature and identity.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name, which marks the occasion when Mary and Joseph presented their newborn son to God in the Temple, to be circumcised and to receive the name of "Jesus." The Hebrew word *Yeshua* that we translate as "Jesus" or "Joshua" means "God saves and helps." Jesus' parents had been given that name by an angel who promised that through this child God would bring salvation to the world.

When Mary and Joseph confer the name of Jesus on him they expressed their faith that the child would be an agent of God's saving justice and faithful love to the people. And so, Jesus' name and mission are identical. To speak Jesus' name is to acknowledge his saving work for humanity and to claim him as our own saviour.

To put it another way, Jesus is the human face of God for us. When we wonder whether God loves us, cares about us, values us, we look at the face of Jesus. When we wonder what sort of deity we worship as God, we look to Jesus, who lived among us to speak and do God's work, then died and rose again to show us the power of God working among us. Through Jesus, we know another name for God, saviour - the one who seeks us out to make us whole. The name of Jesus assures us that God is with us, that in a world which seems so great while we are small and fragile, God cares for us and holds us in life. We honor that name today and call upon him to save and help us.

So, you see, names are powerful things which means we need to consider the power of naming that can build up or destroy. What we call others affects them. The names we use can be means of blessing or cursing. We might ask ourselves: What labels or names have I called others to hurt them or to judge them? How could I name them in a way that would bless them and honor them? What names or labels have others given to me, either for blessing or cursing? How have they affected me, for good or for ill? What names or labels do I use when I think of myself? Some of us have carried the burden of names like Not-good-enough, Lost, Complicated, Troublesome, Worthless. Do the names you've had thrown at you or believe yourself to be offer blessing, encouragement and hope – or do they hurt you or limit you?

Any of us can fall into replaying tapes in our heads of the harsh and cruel things others have said about us and then, ultimately, see ourselves through their eyes. If you take those messages to heart, you are not seeing yourself as God sees you. God sees you as beloved. God knows you by name, loves you as you are, and wants better for you.

And what is God's name for you? As scripture tells us, God is in the business of changing names and if you feel you have been called names that aren't suitable remember God has a name for you. So, claim it. Those names are Beloved, Child of God, Redeemed, One-who-seeks-God's-face, Blessed by God.

And always remember, that when you feel compelled to toss out derogatory names at others how it feels to be belittled and made to feel worthless. Names are sacred and just as God blessed the Israelites so too God blesses us with these words: May the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.