

Sermon from the 2nd Sunday of Christmas, Year A
1 January 2023
St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit
Num 6:22-27; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 2:15-21

Today is the feast of the “holy name.”

We are here focused on the official naming of Jesus. Not his divine titles, though I’ll get to that.

It’s not, though, as if there is some inherent value in the letters composing Jesus’ name, but the name reminds us of the blessings we have received through our Redeemer.

Early in the Gospel of Luke, we heard about how Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her about the Son she was to bear and that she was to name him “Jesus.”

So, Jesus’ name isn’t merely chosen by Mary in the way that you and I were named, though his name—like some of ours’—resonates with our family’s history or was given in hopes that we’ll grow into our names in the form of some beauty or virtue implied by the name. Jesus’ name does echo back into his family’s history, but in a way our names do not. Jesus’ name is different because His name gathers all of *Israel’s* history and centers all of it on him.

We see this is true for Jesus in the way that the beginning drama of Luke’s Gospel is focused on the temple. The Gospel opens with the angel’s message to a certain priest, Zechariah, in the temple. Then today’s reading ends as Jesus is “Named” in the temple according to the proper Jewish customs. Like the good Jewish parents they were, Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the temple after eight days to be circumcised, at which he is given the name, “Jesus,” according to the word given to Mary by the Angel, Gabriel.

Now, *Names...* ensure continuity of identity. Think about it. As we grow up, age, and change, how do you know that I am the same person that I am after all that? Every year 98% of the atoms that make up our bodies are replaced. We come to look different as we age. So, my name is the way you associate me with my family, my community, and my vocation over time, so that *over time* my name comes to be connected to a whole range of actions, motives, drives, and words, that is “me.” And, Jesus’ name is no different *in this basic sense*.

And, Jesus’ name is related to the name, “Joshua,” whose name means, “the Lord will save.” So Jesus’ name goes back to this one, Joshua, who was the apprentice of Moses, such that Jesus’ namesake comes to anticipate salvation—a Sabbath rest of Sabbath rest—that has come about through him.

The name “Joshua” specifically marks out the political nature of Jesus’ ministry from the beginning. Something big is happening to the world in this infant—the Kingdom. Jesus’ significance does not merely apply to us after our deaths; rather, with the incarnation of Jesus, we see the Kingdom on which the future of all mortal flesh hinges.

Joshua—you might remember—was the one who led the Israelites’ military conquests after the people’s exodus from Egypt, first against the Amalakites and eventually against the Canaanites, after whose conquering, Israel went into that land first promised to Abraham. So Jesus’ name involves a political connotation, though the Bible does not locate Jesus as merely another ruler amongst a long list of the various influential personalities of history, kings, emperors, presidents, prime ministers and so forth. He is not merely “a” king, but *the King*, and king of not merely “a” kingdom, but *the Kingdom*; he is not just “a” Messiah, but *the Messiah*, who reigns as the Son of the Most High.

All of these titles and descriptions of Jesus we have heard throughout Advent and Christmas—in the songs of Zechariah and Mary—words like “Messiah,” “Son of God,” “Servant of the House of David,” the One who saves Israel from its enemies,” “the one who guides us in the way of peace”— all *pack* Jesus’ name with the resonant hopes of God’s people, Israel. But there’s more to it than that. Jesus’ existence is *definitive* of *all* other human existences. He isn’t just another ruler among others, even those of Israel herself. Rather, the Gospel from the very beginning attests that all of Israel’s hopes are the hopes of the whole *world*. He is the *the* decisive Savior, the one on whom the meaning and fulfillment of *all* history, which, indeed, includes all of *our*, seemingly little, *lives*.

His rule, his salvation, is *cosmic* in scope; but, the descent of the Son as a child points to the fact that God’s rule will leave nothing and no one out—every stone will be turned, and every eye made to see, the glory of the newborn King.

Thus the words we hear as Moses gives the *Law*, the obedience to which shapes *all of Israel’s* life and *is* her livelihood, we hear again in the Book of Revelation. This time they are literally written “on Jesus’ robe and on his thigh.” We’re told, when Jesus comes again as our Judge, that: “*On his robe and on his thigh*” are inscribed the words: “*King of kings and Lord of lords.*” These words are those we first hear in the book of Deuteronomy: “*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe.*” (Deut 10:17). These words describe even this ... child, ... Jesus.

This assertion—about how God is definitiveness for all people—were first said *after* Moses gave the law for the second time. When Moses descended the mountain with the law, he finds the Israelites to have betrayed the Lord, the One who delivered them from bondage in Egypt, by turning to worship false idols. And, Moses has to go and beg the Lord not to destroy his people, ... these people who are so hardened in their own ways and obstinate to the ways of God. ... But, God consents, and in his grace, gives the law *again* and commits to bring them still into the land of promise, just as he said, BUT NOT SO AS TO make Israel a great nation for *their own sake exactly*, but to make *his name known*, to preserve his name upon the earth even as it comes to be inscribed in the people of Israel themselves.

God’s name is inscribed on this people in the life they are given from God, in their obedience to his law, and, as they are blessed and forgiven by God, and, finally, are made to endure the fires of the nations—God’s judgement—and are subsequently, impossibly, but definitely *remade*, made to live again. And so, in the loving fear of the Lord and obedience to his law, the Lord himself, his *shape*, is in some sense inscribed on Israel’s future and, in their failures, remains etched into

their ancestral hopes... even as Israel betrays their God and their bones are scattered... God remembers his name and his promise to save. Such hopes—of salvation—with all their political and transcendent glory, is found in the name of Israel’s One God, whose words, is etched even into the depths of Israel’s disobedient flesh, such that in time a remnant is brought up again. Israel now, though, by the time of Luke’s Gospel, finally, yields to that Word’s enfleshment in the child that lay in the manger who bears the name “salvation.”

The song, “Silent Night,” seems—in light of all of this—totally ignorant of, yes, the inevitable shouts of pain induced by Mary’s labor and Joseph’s anxious stirrings, but, most of all of Herod’s murderous clamoring after the child known to be Israel’s and the world’s proper King.

Yet, still, this silence is, from another perspective, totally appropriate. The silence of Jesus’ birth is totally that of the GASPING of creation, ... of a breath withdrawn in utter surprise, awe, fear, and joy, before the babe who has crossed the eternal “Red Sea” of Mary’s womb and lands into a world of promise, ...soon to be totally exposed to its violence and totally denied, just like Israel of old, who killed the prophets. ... But, this world is, nevertheless, gasping as it is being drawn out and wrapped up—as the very lengths that swaddle the child lying in the manger. Those “swaddling clothes” are figures of the whole plain of human existence—its sin, pain, and rejection of the One true God. Yet, this is the world that the Lord has come to make into *the land of Promise*. He is born “Lord of Lords and King of Kings” but also the “the Lamb” who has come to conquer and so save.

So we see now the words of the prophet fulfilled on this day: “*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*” (Isaiah 9:6).

And so all of God’s names that we read in Scripture—Adonai, El Shaddai, Elohim, the Fear of Isaac, Holy One of Israel, Mighty One of Jacob—all are ultimately read through the image of the conquering Lamb, who is, for now, swaddled and lying in a manger, secured in the arms of a fearful mother in a damp basement in Bethlehem, now writ “the center of the world.”

And so, as the theologian David Lyle Jeffery, awesomely puts it—Jesus’ “crib is a figure then of the altar, the place where Jesus Christ sacrifices himself. The crib and altar are, in turn, connected to the grave the Lord would someday rest for three days. All these instruments crafted by human hands Jesus then makes into the means of salvation.” In this way he is, indeed, the Lord, who receives us who would know him, transforms our lives as they are— sinful and broken, ... perhaps, even beaten down in different ways—and makes them new... by inscribing the victorious name of Jesus on us, such that we come to share in his life and work.

Of course, there is another image in Scripture, “the Book of Life,”¹ in which we find *our* names written. These names are those who resist accommodation to worldly falsehoods, who remain loyal to the Lord and so find their names inscribed in the book of Life, indeed, the book of life of *the Lamb* who was slain before the foundations of the world were laid. Such names, the names of

¹ cf. Exod. 32:32–33; Ps. 139:16; Isa. 65:6; Mal. 3:16; Jub. 30:19–23; 1 En. 47:3; Rev. 13:8.

those being saved, too, appear *ahead* of the world's creation, though in anticipation of the sacrifice of the Lamb, this Jesus, who is the very same of the shepherd's watch,... but we are not quite there yet. We are still here, with the entrance of the King into his world, where he comes to greet us in the very form of our mortal flesh... skin to skin, face to face, hand to hand, a Body for the Body.

Before fleeting angels the shepherds come to see this babe: skin, face, hand, foot, and *the name*. But after seeing the sight, they do not stay there as if nothing happened,... as if all they ponder, all they see in the eyes of the child is the mere fact of prophecy come to pass. No; they know that everything has utterly changed and so go out to tell others about what they have seen come to pass.

And this brings me back to what I said earlier about how a name is connected to a continuous identity. By my name you know who I am over time. My name identifies me as me amidst all the changes my body undergoes. We come to know what each other means when we speak as we come to know one another better, as we come to know one another's "name" in that deep sense. But with Jesus, as we come to be associated with *his name*, we come share in *his* identity. And, in a deeper sense, through the Spirit, we come not only to be affiliated with Jesus by others through our words and acts, we come to be really identified as Jesus' Body. Our names written on the book! Jesus makes us share in his "holy name" in this way. It is with this identification, in faith, that our lives are then imbued with the power of his name through the Spirit.

And, so, later on in the Gospel of Luke, in its second-part, the book of Acts, the name of Jesus is a significant theme. There we see the Church's continued identification with Jesus by the works that they do through the power of Jesus' name²: speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, faith. It is by taking the name of Jesus on his lips that Peter is able to command a paralytic to "walk." The lowly are brought up; and, so we see the means by which a new social order issues from Jesus' Lordship and which is revealed through the labors of his disciples in the world, that is, that world God is bringing back to himself.

Such is the manner of Christ's rule as the Son of God, triumphant as he is over worldly powers and rulers. It is by his power, precisely in his power to *save*, that Christ's name is exalted above every name, as we read in Philippians, "*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*" (Phil 2). Of course, the wealth of these acclamations stand in contrast to the poverty of the sign: a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth.

What sort of sign is this? The sign to the shepherds doesn't take the form of an extraordinary demonstration of divine power. Rather, *what is signaled* in the birth of Jesus is God's gracious activity to deliver the world into the hands of God—to rescue us, deliver us. The form of the "sign" of the Savior, come to the city of David, lays bare God's gracious act to embrace anew, through this child, *all of his people*, such that we, too, may become children of God made to sit with him in the "land of promise." The Kingdom come.

² Acts 5:41; 7:59; 9:16; 12:4; 14:22; 16:23; 20:19, 22-24, 35; 21:11-14.

Jesus is his name, and he is the Way, the way of Salvation. The one whom we are called to adore, is the same One through whom all things were made, the one who knew our name before the world, such that in his infinite goodness, he would come to each of us individually so as to ask us to know him—not just to know him in fact—but truly receive him as our own, and so come to bear his name, that is, to share in his life, both now and forever, and bear witness to his name before the world, before powers, before principalities, before every life-denying lie, we are called to lift up the name of this child who has already crushed the serpent's head.

Call upon his name. The name of Jesus. The one by which you and the whole world are being saved. Do you dare yourself to peer into the manger as the shepherds did, not just to see but to *be seen by him*, the child, the Lord, and so be healed, liberated, saved?

Before the holy name of Jesus, let all of us bow our heads and bend our knees; yes, before this Jesus, the babe, the lowly One of Israel—God come to serve us in human flesh; this One in whom the world has been overcome. Let us rejoice, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.