

Numbers 6:22-27
Philippians 2:5-11
Psalm 8
Luke 2:15-21P

The Holy Name of Jesus
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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The Rev. Karen Haig

What's in a Name?

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, a feast we don't often celebrate in church. This feast day, according to Luke, is properly held on January first, the eighth day of Christmas. Scripture says 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.¹ For the longest time, the church celebrated this as the Feast of the Circumcision – not my first choice for preaching - but in time, attention turned to the Holy Name of Jesus. That said, both were exceedingly important events in the lives of devoutly practicing Jews. While we won't spend a lot of time here, it's important to note that just as God commanded we honor God's name in the ten commandments, God also commanded that Jewish boys be circumcised on the eighth day as a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham and all of God's people.² When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be circumcised on the 8th day, when they named him Jesus as they had been told, they gave us a glimpse into their life in God and the obedience that life entailed. Their lives were steeped in God's covenant, and in the obedience that life requires. The word obedience comes from oboedire which means to listen. That is important information for us.

Where did your name come from?

I was named for my mother, Martha Eloise, and my maternal grandmother, Karen Josephine. My son was named for his father, Brian Simon and my family name, Haig. Jesus wasn't named after anybody in his family, and neither was John the Baptist. It's true, that until the time of the Babylonian exile, hundreds of years before Jesus was born, people didn't seem to name their children after family members, but by the time Jesus and John the Baptist were born, naming children after family members was the norm. Do you remember at John the Baptist's birth, when everyone thought he would be named Zechariah after his father? But his mother Elizabeth said 'No; he is to be called John.' This was not at all expected, and the friends who had come to celebrate could only reply with "*None of your relatives has this name.*"³ When Zechariah confirmed "*His name is John,*" he was filled with the Holy Spirit and immediately began to

¹Luke 2:21

² Genesis 17:9-12a

³ Luke 1:60-64, 76

prophesy about this child John, who would be called the prophet of the most high. The name John means “Yahweh has been gracious.” You’ll remember that Elizabeth was far beyond child-bearing years when John was conceived. God had been gracious indeed.

When Jesus was born, he wasn’t given the name of his father or grandfather either. He was given the name the angel Gabriel foretold when he announced to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴ And when the angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream telling him not to be afraid to take Mary for his wife, the same thing happened. *‘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.’*⁵ What’s in a name, anyway?

Neither John, nor Jesus were named for their families, but both their names had deep spiritual significance. In Hebrew, the name Jesus is Yeshua, and the English translation is Joshua. Jesus in Greek. But whatever translation we turn to, the name Jesus, the name announced to Joseph and Mary through the angels, means “Yahweh saves.” And that’s what’s in a name. Jesus’ name describes his life’s purpose, and the reason for his coming on earth. Jesus came to save us all and the reality that Yahweh saves is holy indeed.

All throughout scripture we are instructed to call upon the name of Jesus, to pray in the name of Jesus, to heal in the name of Jesus, to ask in the name of Jesus, to believe in his name so that we would become children of God. And in Paul’s letter to the Philippians we hear perhaps the greatest praise for the name of Jesus...

*Therefore God also highly exalted him and 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.*⁶

Calling on the name of Jesus is something we often do in prayer, likely without really thinking too much about it. So many of the prayers in our prayer book end with “through Christ our Lord,” or “In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,” or “to the honor of Jesus Christ our Lord.” I have a friend who ends almost all his prayers with “in Your Son’s name we pray.” I often end prayers with “We pray all these things in your most holy name.” What do you think all that means?

⁴ Luke 1:31

⁵ Matthew 1:20-21

⁶ Philippians 2:9-11

Jesus teaches us to pray in many places throughout scripture. When the disciples saw the importance and the power of Jesus' prayer, they asked him to teach them to pray. Jesus' first response was to say "*Father, your name is holy,*"⁷ a statement that sets the foundation for all our prayer. Jesus told us he would do whatever we asked in prayer, as long as we asked it in his name, because asking in his name brings glory to the Father.⁸ So what does it mean to ask, to pray in Jesus' name?

I think it means to want what God wants.

I think it means that in all our prayers and all our lives, we endeavor to glorify God by living according to our exemplar, Jesus. To pray in Jesus' name, to want what God wants, eliminates the "magical thinking" that we'll get the answer we want or that we'll be cured or even that we'll turn into better people by saying we're praying in Jesus' name. I think praying in Jesus' name, wanting what God wants, means loving with the reckless abandon God loves with, acting for justice, peace and dignity for all people, trusting that God is at work in everything and that we have all that we need to be the face of Christ in the world. As it turns out, praying in Jesus' name is a big commitment, and one that requires the same sort of obedience Mary and Joseph practiced in their lives in God. Obedience that is born of listening for the still, small voice of God, listening for God's particular instruction to each one of us, listening for the shape of the life God is calling us to. I know that obedience is not a popular social construct, and that it implies a sort of subservience that independent Americans aren't necessarily all that interested in. And as hard as it may be to swallow, for me, subservience is precisely the right posture in the face of the holy. It doesn't mean we're nothing, just as obedience doesn't mean we don't think clearly or critically or that we can't figure anything out on our own. Subservience simply means a willingness to obey. A willingness to obey the God whose name is love.

Yahweh saves. Jesus does that by loving each one of us with absolute abandon and he calls us to do the same. So... please pray with me.

Gracious God,

You have called us to love, which sounds easy but is often hard.

You have called us to obedience, which sounds hard but is sometimes easy.

You have called us to obedient love, which sounds like an oxymoron, but really isn't.

You have called us to loving obedience, which sounds crazy but leads to peace.

So help us, dear God, to love, and help us to obey.

⁷ Luke 11:2

⁸ John 14:13-14

Help us, that is, to look to the needs of others and respond with the compassion we see in Jesus. Help us to ask whether what we are called to do, choose to do, or want to do is motivated from love.

If it is, give us the power to do it and keep at bay those forces that would hinder us from obeying your command to love one another.

If it is not, prevent us.

It's that simple, and that difficult. Help us, dear God, we ask in Jesus' most holy name.

Amen.