

Past Sermons

The Feast of the Holy Name
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This is the eighth day of Christmas, the Feast of the Holy Name, the day on which Jesus was circumcised and thus marked as a member of God's People Israel.

On the eighth day of life, when the male child is circumcised, he is also officially named.

In our culture we are named at various points. We are usually officially named at the hospital when our parents fill out the legal form. But sometimes we have been named long before we were born. This name can stick with us through that official naming or change once we have appeared. I was called "Petey" all through my mother's pregnancy, but when I appeared as a girl that changed. We are also named at our Baptism. Our first name is often called our "Christian name" meaning truly our baptismal name. This is the name by which we are known to the Church, to the Kingdom of God, the name under which we are "marked as Christ's own forever." In some churches it has been the custom to add another name at Confirmation. Thus a friend of mine named Robert became Robert Christopher in the Church but not on any legal document.

Naming is a very important thing because our name is our identity. We are also identified by our social security numbers, driver's license and passport numbers, and a whole host of numerical designations. But that is not who we are. Our names are who we are.

Some of us have legal names used by insurance agents and tax officials, which are entirely different from our true names known to our friends and family. Many of us have names used only by those closest to us.

To know a person's true name, the name by which she identifies herself, is to genuinely know her in some important degree. That is why it is important to us that people remember our names. To say I remember you, but do not remember your name, may be absolutely true, but does not feel true.

We do not feel remembered if our names have been forgotten, however much else is remembered. I once knew a Rector who persisted in calling many of his parishioners by the wrong names. The result was that, although he had a genuine affection for them, and a genuine sense of who they were as individuals, they did not feel recognized or known.

To speak a person's name proclaims some kind of relationship. To call you by name to your face draws you close. To call you by name when speaking to other people affects you. People who name-drop are attempting to attach to themselves some of the personal power or credit or glory of the people whose names they mention. This is a form of using

someone's name in vain, using it inappropriately for our own ends. No one likes to have his or her name used to further someone else's ends. Because it is able to diminish us.

If our names are so significant, so important to who we are and how we are in relationship with the whole rest of the world, how much more significant is God's name!

One of the curiosities of the ancient Hebrew tradition is the relationship between God's Chosen People and God's own Name. Remember how Moses was first told God's Name? He was conversing, arguing, with God at the Burning Bush, being told to go back to Egypt, to the place where he was a wanted murderer, and proclaim various things on God's behalf, in the name of God. He did not think anyone would believe him if he could not tell them God's name. After all, everyone knew Isis and Osiris and Ptah and Anubis? so who was this sending commands? They would rightly demand a name.

And God told Moses the divine Name? YHWH. This was a really big deal, a personal name for the one who was beyond all things, who had created all things. Moses had been told God's Name and had been told to tell it to the people of Israel.

From then on they were to have this unique relationship with God, as the people on a first name basis with the divine. But because the Name is attached to the holiness of God, because it is the Name above every name, the Name with the most power, it is a Name to be used with the utmost care. So over time, the awareness that one should never ever use this Name inappropriately urged a caution that avoided its use altogether.

Those who read the holy scrolls of the Torah knew to not pronounce the divine name, to substitute Adonai (the Lord) whenever the sacred Tetragrammaton, the four consonants of the Holy proper name of God, appeared in the text. So over the centuries the memory of how it was originally pronounced was lost. We know the consonants of God's Name, but are unsure about the rest. The Tetragrammaton itself has been considered by some to have such extraordinary power that it can be used to change reality.

What a powerful Name! a Name that says that God has initiated a personal relationship with human individuals, with the human community. This is so important that in some parts of the Jewish tradition, God is referred to as haShem, the Name.

So what does Jesus tell us about the name of God? We all know this. Jesus says to call God?Daddy? ? Abba. Jesus says that God wants to be on such intimate terms with us that we do not call God even by the personal name given through Moses, but by the most intimate name that a tiny child uses for a beloved parent. This is personal and familial.

Once again, God has come close and has invited us into relationship with a name. You can call me Daddy.

But the name which we celebrate today is the name that was given to the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word Incarnate, at his Bris Milah, when he was subjected to the knife like every Jewish boy for centuries before and after,

When the covenant between God and the People of God was marked in his human, infant flesh.

This name is thus part of the Nativity story, part of the extraordinary humility of God taking on all of the limitations and struggles of human life, to live among us as one of us. The baby is circumcised and given a name, not a mysterious name like Yahweh, that people will forever write long articles about, that may mean 'I am' or something very like it, a name to identify and also to mystify.

This time the name is a perfectly usual Jewish name 'Yeshua' 'Joshua' 'Jesus'. There would have been other boys at synagogue with the same name. There were important people in Jewish history with the same name. This name belonged to the man chosen to lead the people from the wilderness across the river Jordan into the Promised Land. So it was a name of history, of power, of the people.

But it was also a name with meaning and therefore with promise. Yeshua, God saves.

This is the most Holy Name, the name given for our salvation. Yeshua, God saves. God does save. God has saved. God will save. In Jesus.

This name is given to the baby, the baby who has been given to us and for us. This was more than an ordinary circumcision and naming ceremony. This is a promise from God to us, to all people in all times and places. Yeshua 'Jesus'.

Thus we celebrate today, Jesus' naming and Name. We celebrate another aspect of the divine humility and generosity, as we acknowledge that there is a Name above all names, a Name to which and through which every knee shall bow and every tongue confess 'the Jesus Christ is Lord'.

To those of us who have grown up in English-speaking communities, Jesus is a unique name, proper to the Son of God, given to us as part of our access to God in prayer 'through Jesus Christ our Lord'. It may seem uncomfortable to us that in other cultures, Jesus 'Jesus' has remained a common name. But that is exactly what it was.

The commonness says that Jesus is truly one of us, could truly experience even the annoyance of sharing a name with a classmate. That does not change the fact that once it became his name, Jesus 'Joshua' 'Yeshua' became a Name unique in all creation, a Name attached to God, a Name by which we are brought into relationship with God, a Name upon which we can call with confidence.

The Name gives Jesus individuality and specificity, just as ours do for us. We become upset when people use this name in vain, because it is insulting someone we love and depend on.

Because this name has so much meaning and so many complex associations for us, we are able to feel its power. This is a Holy Name, because it belongs to the Son of God, because it was decreed by the angel, because it was carried through the whole life, death, and resurrection of the Christ.

Our names become holy when they are pronounced at our Baptism and when they are spoken by those who truly love us. They can be defiled by those who wish us harm, but never totally because they have been attached forever to that most Holy of Names, Jesus.

Part of the Christian vision of reality is that we are each genuine, unique individuals, created by God. That is why our names are spoken at our baptisms and recorded in the Church register. We are not part of some amorphous, if holy, whole subsumed into God. We are and remain singular, individual, namable. Jesus calls us each by name, even as we call him by name. All that we are is known and loved by God, embraced and held fast into eternity.

And that is a bit of what we celebrate today, and each January 1st, the Feast of the Holy Name.

Gracious and Loving God, who knows us each by name and loves us each in our uniqueness, thank you for giving us names by which to address you and to know you. Help us to be worthy of this honor and to appreciate this gift. Grant that we also join you in respecting the names of one another and the uniqueness each represents. We ask this in the most holy Name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.