

Holy Name A 2023

January 1, 2023

Holy Family, Laurel Springs

Mary was not given a lot of choice when it came to her son, Jesus. She was told by an angel that she would bear him and at the same time told what she was going to name him!

Chapters 1 and 2 of the Gospel of Luke (verses 26-33) from the Message paraphrases tell it like this.

²⁶⁻²⁸ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her: Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty, Beautiful inside and out! God be with you.

²⁹⁻³³ She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and **give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.**

He will be great,

be called 'Son of the Highest.'

The Lord God will give him

the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom.”

The Feast of the Holy Name is celebrated on January 1, the eighth day after the birth of Jesus, when he was named and circumcised. He was "called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Luke 2:21). Under the Law of Moses, all male infants were to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (Leviticus 12:3). It was also customary at this time for family and friends to witness the naming of the child. This major feast is celebrated on Jan. 1, the eighth day of the Christmas season. The designation of the feast in honor of Jesus' Holy Name is new to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. It was traditionally celebrated as the Feast of the Circumcision. Celebration of the Holy Name reflects the significance of the Holy Name of Jesus, and the emphasis of the Gospel of Luke on the naming of Jesus rather than his circumcision.

We would do well to consider the power of names and the ways in which they shape our destiny, especially on this day, the Feast of the Holy Name. For the Church, on this fresh, first day of the new calendar year, we are presented with the name of Jesus and asked to consider how it has shaped and continues to shape our own

destiny as his followers and as his family. **It is the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who is the Christ that indicates our fundamental identity as God's children.**

The Gospel of Luke tells us that after his birth, Mary and Joseph had their newly-born child circumcised and that they bestowed on him the name given by the angel of the Lord at the Annunciation: Jesus, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means, "the Lord has saved." The Church has long celebrated this event on the eighth day of the Christmas season, because, as reflected in the Gospel text and in Jewish tradition, circumcision and naming occurred eight days after birth.

And so, on this day, as we review our lists of new year's resolutions and ponder what 2023 might hold for each of our lives, we are also invited back into the life story of the infant Jesus. With his circumcision and naming, we are invited into Jesus' ritual incorporation into the history and hope of the Jewish people. We are invited to reexamine the ways that this particular name (and time, and place) will have a direct bearing on the nature of his messianic mission. And we are invited to pause and reconsider what a radical, surprising thing all of this is.

Because in the name Jesus, the God who transcends all

identities took on a certain narrative and a certain social location, thus revealing an intimate concern with the particularities of our own narratives and social locations. In the name Jesus, God concentrated the fullness of divine love within the parameters of a single life, demonstrating that each of our single lives has the capacity to receive and pour out that love, too. Through our baptism, the name of Jesus becomes our name. His story becomes our story.

God has been working through names for a very long time. In Genesis, he names the various components of creation—the Night, the Day, the Sky, the Seas, the living creatures. And in the Book of Numbers, as we read today, God says to Moses that by blessing Israel, “They shall put my name on the Israelites.” The name of God is imprinted on God’s people; their purpose and their future hinges on remembering the One for whom and by whom they are named. And through Christ, this adoption has extended to all who receive the name of Jesus.

We often speak of faith as being in relationship—with God and with one another. But bearing a name, it should be said, is not quite the same as participating in a relationship. It is deeper, more intractable, For us, as Christians, it means that the name of Jesus is

something so deeply a part of us that it cannot be negated by any particular decision we might make. We belong to him, and no past mistake, no failed resolution; no future error in judgment can erase that name from our lives. We are not “in a relationship” when we are given a name—we simply are that thing, that person. This is how closely we are known and held by God in Christ.

This is why Paul can say in his letter to the Galatians that “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” in such a manner that we are God’s children, not servants subject to the variable temperament of a master. Through the name of Jesus, we have been incorporated into an inalienable bond between the Father and the Son. The Son dwells within us and relates to the Father through us. This is the gift and the responsibility that we carry through our lives.

Given all of this, it might be fruitful for us to consider how the name of Jesus—which is now our name, too—might shape how we desire to live in this new year. Do our hopes for the coming months include growing more fully into our identity as one named by God? What steps might we take to discover that identity anew? What stumbling blocks have prevented us in the past from claiming the name of Jesus as our own?

Answering these questions is a key reason why we come together each week. This is the beauty of the Church and the communities we find within it: they are the places where we work out what it means to answer to the name of Jesus. We serve, and welcome, and challenge, and listen, and worship, and abide with one another. We look for traces of Jesus in each other's faces, and in the faces of the poor, and we pray that they might see him in us as well.

And we also remember that although this Holy Name bears our destiny—which this child circumcised and named, today must grow, and learn, and suffer, and live, and die, and so we must along with him—nonetheless God is always doing something new. The story is only just beginning.

Our story—that of the name of Jesus—inescapably leads to a cross, but it continues onward, too, into the joy of resurrection and the promise of eternal life that rests in the Holy Name of God. It is another story transfigured by love—the story that we tell, and the story that we live.

It is my prayer for all of us that 2023 is a year we boldly

proclaim and live into our identities as Sons and Daughters of God.
May we live each day and use each opportunity to confidently
bring the message of God's love and healing grace into this
frightening and confusing world.