

In the name of God- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is in a name? Shakespeare famously wrote “that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Proverbs 22:1 says “a great name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” And so it is. We all know the power of a name. Last names such as Bush, Vanderbilt, or Kennedy all carry great power with them. Some names even become part of the language- Einsteinian. We’ve lost the sense of definition of names in our culture. But often in the Bible we read about people whose names are titles. Abraham means “father of many,” Isaac means “laughter,” because of the preposterous situation of a son being born to the very old Abraham and Sarah. Names in the Bible are powerful, as they are titles of definition. And titles in our world are important too. Look at a business card, everyone these days is a vice president of something. We like big titles, just as the people of the Bible liked big names.

The question of a name is really about how do you see yourself? How do you define yourself? If you could choose one word to describe yourself, what would it be? Names don't really capture that anymore. Robert is a German name, meaning "fame" and "bright." I won't complain about those attributes, but I think I agree with Shakespeare, a name is just a name. I'd like to think that if my name were Thomas, Steve or anything else, that I'd be the same person. But the idea of a name in the Bible, when we talk about the name of God, Jesus, or any person in the Bible, name really isn't the right translation. We're really talking about their character, their identity, their title. So names, in that Biblical sense, really are important. The Biblical name is perhaps what you'd put on your tombstone, or what you'd want future generations to remember about you.

I think it is fitting that we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name today. It is a tradition that dates back to at least the 14th century. We

commemorate of the circumcision of Jesus eight days after his birth; this was the time in Jewish custom when a child was named, or given a sense of identity. And in being named, they officially became a part of the family and an heir of the promise God made to Abraham. Different churches celebrate this day at different times, and it's fairly rare in the Episcopal Church. Holy Name always falls on January 1, and January 1 does not often happen on a Sunday. New Year's Day is a great time for us to be considering the ideas of name and identity.

Everyone is talking about resolutions, which, in essence, say "how do I want to be different this year?" "How do I want to be known differently." In the Biblical sense, "how do I change my name, or how do I live into my name in a truer way." As we begin the year, we think about what we want to accomplish, what we look forward to, what we hope to avoid. Sometimes we even name the year. The year of self-control, the year of exercising more, the year of traveling more, the

year of retiring. As we begin another year, what name will you claim for yourself?

The name that was claimed for the son born to Mary was “Jesus.” Jesus was actually a very common name; it wasn’t a special name. Jesus is the Hebrew form of “Joshua,” which was just as common then as it is today. Jesus is a fitting name though, as it means “God saves.” There are the traditions of casting out demons simply by using the name of Jesus. I’m sure we’ve all known people who in moments of fear or being at the end of their rope repeat the name of Jesus to themselves. In charismatic circles, chanting the name of Jesus will ward off evil spirits. Jesus’ name is something people have been willing to fight for and to die for. Philippians says that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend. It is a name taken in vain often, but also a name given great respect. There is great power and healing power in the name of Jesus.

But, as I said, Jesus was a common name and the actual name of things isn't nearly as important as the identity of a thing. And the identity of Jesus as God's salvation is what truly matters. The person of Jesus of Nazareth is what we venerate and follow as Christians. What the name of Jesus communicates to us is God's blessing.

Jesus is the agent of God's love, God's grace, God's redemption, God's presence with us. And that is why the name of Jesus is so important- it reminds us of those blessings. Christmas is the season where we celebrate the rebirth of hope, where we celebrate that God has become incarnate in our world. This is unique in Christianity. No other religion claims that God, the creator and redeemer of all, the source and end of everything, has taken on the flesh of Creation and joined it. And that is a true blessing. This earth is blessed through Jesus' presence on it, and so are we. We breathe the same air that Jesus did,

we walk on the same earth, we awake each day to the light of the same sun.

The blessing of the Incarnation is in the name of Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” It was the yearning of the Hebrew people, and it is our deepest desire- to know that we are not alone, to know that we are always being held in God’s hand, to know that we are redeemed. As I’ve said in other sermons, what God gives us is maximum support, with minimum protection. The blessing of God does not mean there will be no pain, no loss, no depression, no illnesses, no layoffs, no deaths; but what the blessing of God’s presence does mean is that we will not be alone in those things. It means that God will be there to redeem the situation.

This connection between names and blessing is found in our Old Testament reading today as well. This passage is often called the priestly or Aaronic, as in Moses’ brother Aaron, blessing. God says to

the people “so shall they put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” Being united to God in God’s name is a true blessing. In our baptisms, in our self-identity as Christians, we receive this blessing through God’s name.

In Judaism, this priestly blessing is extremely important and sacred. It is recited only by priests and there are many customs attached to its usage to ensure it is used reverently and properly. There is also an interesting bit of trivia out there about the hand signal used in the priestly blessing. Leonard Nimoy, better known as Spock from Star Trek, grew up in a very religious Jewish household, and he used a variation of the hand sign and priestly blessing in the show. In Jewish custom, the priest makes this sign when pronouncing the words. So you can see how it got adapted to “live long and prosper,” which is a sort of paraphrase of the whole blessing.

The priestly blessing is a beautiful prayer. God tells Aaron to use these words instead of human words. There are no ifs, no perhaps, no maybes in this blessing. It is definite- God will do these things. And throughout this passage from Numbers, the emphatic “I” is used to stress that God loves and cares for God’s people and will bless them. There are three movements to the priestly blessing. The first is that God will bless us and keep us. These are words tied to ideas of sustaining us. These are the words used to talk about the blessing of harvests, land, and descendants. Secondly, God will make his face to shine upon us and be gracious to us. It is a blessing of God’s presence with us, that God’s light will shine on us, despite the darkness of the life. It asks that God be gracious to us and that God show us mercy. And finally, it asks that God show his countenance upon us, giving us peace. In Hebrew, the word for peace is *shalom*, which is full of meaning. It is used throughout the Bible to mean such things as prosperity, longevity,

happiness, safety, security, good health, friendship, well-being, and tranquility. Like the Lord's prayer, it is a simple prayer, but all-inclusive and full of beautiful language. And at its conclusion, God says that this prayer of priestly blessing puts God's name on them and blesses them.

You all go by many different names, but perhaps our names in the Biblical sense would be "children of God." And in being named that, we locate ourselves in relationship to God. This is a relationship of being blessed. This name is a blessing of inward grace. The world might call you a lot of things, it will judge you, you will be called names, in the negative sense. But those are not your names, you are not defined by those terms, or even the attributes you put on yourself. Instead, know that you are the child of God. That is your name. And in this name, you are blessed.

And, of course, there is the other side of the coin. Bearing God's name means that we have a mission to fulfill. This is not a blessing to

enjoy in our own little corner. This is not a secret name that we carry, but it is to be proclaimed to the world. This name that we have is a call to action. In bearing God's name we will be blessed, but we will also be challenged. Our example is Jesus. He bore a very special name, the name of God's Messiah, of God Incarnate- and he was greatly blessed in that. But Jesus also shed blood, sweat, and tears for his name. He did not hide his name. When it would have been politically or personally expedient to change his name, he stuck with it. Though he only had minimum protection, he was constantly blessed with maximum support; and the same is true for us.

This New Year's Day, as we consider our resolutions, as we contemplate on the upcoming year and the names we'd like to go by- let us remember our most basic name- "child of God." And in that name, we will be blessed with God's presence, God's love, God's peace. Remember each and every day this year- you are blessed. Amen.