

Christmas 1A (The Name of Jesus)
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
January 1, 2023

Is 63:7-9
Psalm 148
Hebrews 2:10-18
Matthew 2:13-23

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There's a lot to celebrate this time of year. And in our society we start early, don't we. I think that I heard the first Carol of the Bells in a TV commercial around the time of Halloween. Yes, now in December, we have Christmas Eve and Christmas Day followed by New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. But, there are some other days that don't get much attention. In the church's calendar we have Christmas Eve on December 24, Christmas Day on December 25, and then the Festival of St. Stephen, Deacon and first martyr, on December 26, followed by the Festival of St. John on December 27, and then the Holy Innocents, martyrs whom we heard about in today's Gospel, on December 28th. But there's another one, one that we don't hear much about, even in the church. And that is today, January 1st, eight days after December 25th. The festival we observe today is the Holy Name of Jesus and scripture has one verse about this: *When the eighth day (after his birth) came, 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.*

The Church has marked this holiday in two very different ways. For centuries, January 1st was known as the "Feast of the Circumcision of Christ." According to Jewish law, male babies are circumcised when they are eight days old, and today is the 8th day of Christmas – eight days since Jesus was born. Today, we call it the Feast of the Name of Jesus. The change is quite understandable, don't you think? But seriously, today is the day that Jesus was named.

Throughout history, the naming of a child has been given great significances. Names not only identified who a person is, but also who they might become. Typically, they told you something about what a person's family did for a living. Names like Baker, Smith, Knight, Cooper, and Cartwright all came from the trades. A child named Brewer was expected to grow up and brew beer!

This is still true for us today. Whenever we meet a person in a social situation, we typically ask right off the bat: *What's your name?* and *What do you do?* Our names identify us somewhere in the line of our ancestors. Our vocation describes one of the roles we played in society. Our identity is intimately bound up in both who we are and what we are called to do in society.

In recent days, we've heard a lot about identity, haven't we. And we have witnessed one person whose publicly proclaimed identity has amounted to nothing more than a sham. So devoid of a sense of self was he that he concocted stories about his grandparents, his childhood, his education and vocation. Falsehoods about where he lived, who he loved, his religious heritage and traumas in his life and in the lives of family members. So hollow was his identity that even his name changed depending upon where he was and what he was doing.

Names and identity. So, when Mary and Joseph brought the baby to the temple to be circumcised on the eighth day, the day when the baby would be given his name, they gave him the name *Jesus*. And while we as Christians hold that name in high esteem, actually it was a pretty common name at the time. In fact, it was a variation of the name Joshua. It means, “God is Salvation.”

I find it interesting that throughout scripture when God recognizes something more in a person than their name captures, God gives that person a new name. God renamed Abram and Sarai. The name Abram meant “exalted father,” but God called him Abraham, meaning “the father of nations.” Sarai meant “quarrelsome,” but God called her Sarah, which means “princess.” God took Jacob, which means “heel grabber” and renamed him Isaac, meaning “the one who struggles with God.” Jesus will also call Simon, whose name means “to hear” or “to listen” by the name Cephas or Peter, both of which mean “rock.” Saul, who is the persecutor of the first followers of Jesus, will be given the Greek name Paul as he is sent to bring the Good News of God’s salvation found in Jesus to the Gentiles, who would otherwise remain left out of the coming reign of God.

In each of these and many more cases, God recognizes something inside a person and gives them a new name, a name by which God knows them. And if we believe that names impart identity, and our identity is not only how we are known but also our vocation – that is, what we are now called to – not necessarily that which we are paid to do, God called Jesus by name to be the *incarnation*, the en-fleshment, of God's salvation. Through Jesus, God's salvation was delivered into the world in the form of a living, breathing, human child. As we consider the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, consider all that that means. It means that God came into the world in human form and, eight days later, was circumcised, and bled, and cried just like every other Jewish baby boy. God came into the world as a baby, to live as one of us, so that we might one day come to live in him.

But there's something more going on here. Because if God, the maker of heaven and earth, sees us as no one else does – and if God can even give us a new name that better reflects who God knows us to be – then what does it mean when we say that God “calls us by name?” Is there something that God knows about you that perhaps you don't even know yourself? What new thing might God be calling you to be or do or experience?

In Paul's letter to the Galatians he writes, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, ... so that we might receive adoption as [his] children... So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

This is how God sees you – as God's own child, just as Jesus was. And if you are God's own child, then you are God's heir, an heir to the kingdom of God. My friends, this is the best news we can possibly hear on this New Year's Day: That we are called and named by God. That our names are holy, because we are marked with the cross of Christ – forever. We are made Christ's own in the waters of baptism and adopted by God. Our identity, the essence of each of us is found in who we are and whose we are -- children of God sopping wet in the waters of our baptisms and heirs of God's kingdom on earth. *Thanks be to God.*

