

# Feast of the Holy Name

YEAR A

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church/La Iglesia Episcopal de la Resurrección

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Happy New Year! While the Church has been going through its calendar for two months the world is now entering a new year and we hear of names and circumcision. In Hebrew thought, a name signifies the essence of someone, giving us pause to contemplate our own names. My mother's story is, that I was named, out of panic, when the nurse demanded a name for her paperwork, so Norman Dennis it was. Mom said that the Norman came out of her Swedish heritage, I've never heard where Dennis came from. Norman was only used on official documents and I have always been called and gone by., Dennis. By the way Dennis come from the Greek and is connected to the god Dionysus and means "lover of fine wines." So, what is the story of your name?

The Collect for this morning begins, "Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation:" Mary is told in Luke that the child will be named Jesus and an angel, in Matthew, tells Joseph, to name the baby Jesus "...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." (Mt1:20-21)

The name Jesus has to live up to, in Hebrew, Yehoshua, Yeshua, Joshua, Jesus meaning the Lord (rescues), (helps), (saves), or (delivers). Jesus' purpose is in his name and is visible from the very beginning and through his coming to maturity. When we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus, we are celebrating the one through whom and in whom the Lord promise to help and save his peoples.

All through scripture God is giving or changing people's names to recognize who they are and where they fit into the story. Abram meant "exalted

father,” but God, as part of the covenant changes Abram’s name to Abraham, “the father of many nations,” “for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations,” (Gen 17-5). Sarai, his wife, loses the name meaning ‘quarrelsome,’ and is elevated to Sarah, ‘princess.’ Jacob the rascal actually means ‘heel-grabber’ as he held onto Esau’s heel at birth, is renamed Israel, “the one who struggles with God.” Jesus renames Simon, meaning “to hear” or “to listen” something Simon had difficulty doing, to the name Cephas or Peter, both of which mean “rock.” Saul, a 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. As Paul tells the Galatians “So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” (Gal) 4:7

“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.” (Lu 2:21) The bris is the most important religious event in the life of a Jewish boy and it is also the time he is named. Girls are named in the midst of the congregation when it first gathers after her birth. The children and the parents are named in the blessing at the end of the service. Circumcision and naming connect the child to the multitude of generations past and those in the future.

We are also welcomed into the family by our baptism and naming. In the older versions of the Book of Common Prayer the Catechism at the back of the book begins with the question; “: What is your Name? Followed by, “Who gave you this Name? The answer being “My Sponsors in Baptism; wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” Question. “Dost thou not think that thou art bound to believe, and to do, as they [your sponsors] have promised for thee?” Answer. “Yes, verily; and by God’s help so I will. And I heartily thank our heavenly Father, that he hath called me to this state of salvation, through Jesus Christ our Savior. And I pray unto God to give me his grace, that I may continue in the same unto my life’s end.” Through our baptism and through Jesus we are linked into Christ and the kingdom.

Until the coming of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, when this day became the Feast of the Holy Name, it was the Feast of The Circumcision of Christ, in the 1928 BCP. In the collect for Holy Name we pray to God who gave “the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation.” The collect for the Circumcision emphasizes circumcision as a sign of obedience to the law of God, in body and in spirit, the link to the Abrahamic Covenant.

The covenant between God and the people of Israel, through Abraham, Genesis 17, creates the tradition that links the Jewish people to the patriarchs. The circumcision ceremony, called the bris or brit milah, is also a ceremony when the child is given the blessing of a name. The feast day we celebrate when Jesus is doubly marked. He is circumcised as a physical sign of God’s faithfulness to God’s people and of his connection to Abraham and his Jewish ancestors, his Jewishness. He is named, with a name that expresses his nature as the savior sent from God to redeem God’s people.

This particular bris was likely very humble and, in Luke, occurred in the stable while in Matthew, the home or on the road to Egypt. Either way, Joseph or perhaps another relative preside and did the deed. The naming of Jesus takes place in mean estates, it is the naming of a poor baby boy.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is as stark a contrast between the earthiness and physicality of the circumcision, and the mystical, divine nature of Jesus’ name. Paul reminds us that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Paul is explicit—in human form, Christ was humble and obedient to the point of death. At the same time, “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.”

In the thousands of years of the game of telephone that is scripture we believe that we are also recipients of the gift of blessing given at the foot of Mt Sinai as the Israelites prepare to decamp to the promised land.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

So, they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

(Numbers 6:22-27)

So what is the story of the journey with your name?