

Sermon, The Feast of the Holy Name 2012 Year B
Numbers 6:22-27
Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 2:15-21
Psalm 8

Names are important. Some names carry an almost magical mystique.

Cleopatra for example or
Samson
Delilah
The Queen of Sheba

Names carry meaning and memory. There are names of peace such as:

Gandhi
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Of sainthood such as
Francis of Assisi
or Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Some names bring to mind great leadership:

Alexander the Great
Napoléon Bonaparte
George Washington
Thomas Jefferson

Some names speak of evil:

Adolph Hitler
Idi Amin
Osama bin Laden

Just speak the name and a mental image or picture emerges complete with emotional attachment and meaning.

Friday's News and Advance carried an article outlining research at Emory University on names from the African Diaspora. It seems names are ethno-linguistically specific. The name can reveal the region of origin in Africa and a vital clue to where families originated.

New parents spend a lot of time considering what they will name their children.

For some, family names carry great meaning. I am the third and my son is the fourth with my name.

For others, what the name stands for carries meaning: Names like...

Charity
Grace
Joy

and Justice come to mind.

Last month, an Episcopal priest friend of mine named her daughter Zoe which in Greek means life.

Still other names carry meaning derived from scripture:

John
Rebecca
Leah
Rachel
Sarah
Jacob

Not many are named Job, it does not seem to portend good things. And we do want good things for our children.

Some choose children's names by how they sound or because they are popular at a certain time or culture.

Names are important. The value of a good name cannot be overstated. You see, people are their names.

Calling a person by name values them. It is said that there are few things we enjoy more than hearing our name called.

Our OT lesson from the Book of Numbers describes the very nature of blessing. God instructs Moses in his desire to bless the people by way of his priests. The Lord gives Moses a specific blessing that his brother Aaron, the priest, is to say over the people. Speaking the name in blessing conveys meaning and grace in its very utterance. The act of saying God's name over the people imparted blessing as the last line of our reading stated, "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

As a child in church I knew and felt that sense of receiving God's grace as the blessing was said at the end of the service. Perhaps associating it with my father's frequent admonition to sit still, I imagined that the quieter and stiller I knelt during the blessing, the more grace I received. To this day I stand as still as possible. I cannot even mark myself with the sign of the cross. The movement might limit the grace received.

Today is a rare event in the life of the Church. Yes, it is New Year's Day, and this is a particularly opportune place to welcome in the New Year. Liturgically, we are celebrating an event that only happens once in every seven years or so. When Christmas falls on a Sunday, the following Sunday instead of the usual lectionary readings for the first Sunday after Christmas, the lectionary readings are changed for the Feast of the Holy Name. This refers to the ancient Jewish tradition of naming the male child upon their circumcision on the eighth day of life. Our gospel lesson from Luke was the familiar passage that we heard on Christmas Eve and Day but with one line added. The 21st verse says, "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." Faithful Mary and Joseph had fulfilled the ancient Jewish customs and named Jesus on the eighth day.

Names and the assigning of names were very important in Jewish culture. The story of the birth of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin turns on the event of naming. Luke begins his gospel with the story of the birth of John the Baptist. While his father Zechariah was serving his priestly role in the temple, he was visited by the angel Gabriel. The angel announced that Zechariah's prayers had been heard and his wife Elizabeth would bear a son and he was to be named John. When Zechariah expressed his doubt to the angel he was made speechless until the angel's prophecy should come true. Lo and behold the elderly Elizabeth became with child and gave birth. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child and they planned to name him Zechariah after his father. "But his mother said, 'no he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.'" Immediately, his tongue was freed and he began to speak praising God. John's name like all names was very important.

The birth of Jesus in that manger in Bethlehem was the fulfillment of generations of expectation and hope. Names for this hoped for Messiah tumble down through scripture and we retell those stories each year as we recall the nativity. From the prophet Isaiah who promised, "For a child will be born for us, a son given to us." And "he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Just saying these names brings to my mind the sound of them sung in the Messiah.

Or from Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."

Names in scripture carry great meaning, indicative of the role a person is to play. Mary and Joseph did not name this child. The naming was part of God's unfolding plan of salvation. In the Annunciation to Mary in the first chapter of Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel said, "You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus."

In Matthew's gospel Joseph has a dream in which he is told to take Mary for his wife in spite of her pregnancy. The angel tells Joseph that she is with child from the Holy Spirit and the child is to be named Jesus. The angel in Joseph's dream continues and expands on Isaiah's text, Mt. 1:23, "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

Generations of Hebrew expectation preceded the birth of Jesus. His birth though as his life would be anything but what was expected. Jesus was born in the most unexpected and seemingly impossible of circumstances. The circumstances in that manger in Bethlehem echoed perhaps the angel Gabriel's assurance, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

Jesus in his life and ministry would enact his name. His name means "he who saves." Jesus came to save his people.

God gave us Jesus, who lived into his name fulfilling God's hopes for the world. As the writer of the letter to the Philippians expressed it, "Therefore 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 earth and under the earth, every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

He came to reveal the very nature of God to us and to the world. To allow us to see a glimpse of God and in seeing to learn something of God's hopes for us. Hopes for us and for our names.

It is said that we make a name for ourselves over the course of our lives. Your name speaks your reputation. We can give meaning to our names over the course of our lives, with emphasis coming at the end as if to add an exclamation point. We will be remembered most for what we have done most recently. The good news in that is that our names are always a work in progress, just like our lives.

So perhaps you are working to live into your name, whether that name came from someone much loved in your family, or from scripture, or just because it had a nice ring to it. Your life will create your name. Your name holds all that people will remember. It is what comes to mind when they first think of you.

So as we begin this New Year, may you know God's blessing in your life. A blessing that will allow us to grow into the disciples that God hopes we will become. And in so doing, may we make a name for ourselves and in turn may our lives be all that God hopes.