

Sermon for the Feast of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus

“...He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

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In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the titular female ‘lead’ asks defiantly, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell just as sweet.”

We’re want, in our day and age, to agree wholeheartedly, and perhaps then some. For us, names tend to carry little more than the significance of establishing legal identity - labeling us so that our presence can be noted on roll calls and tax documents. We may like our name, the way it rings or flows... or perhaps not. No big deal - by going through the proper channels, it can always be changed.

Still, our own experience hints to us that there is still more to it than that. Names can and do carry baggage - association with a family or culture, for better or worse. You can change the name, but escaping “that from which you came,” to which your name alluded, is not so easy. Even in the case of Juliet, the very REAL pressure brought on by the rivalry that existed between the respective family names ultimately led to her and Romeo’s tragic deaths by suicide. At the end of the day, at some level, names simply DO matter.

The scriptures don’t just tacitly allow for all this - they PRESUME it. There’s a certain “dominical” quality in the giving of names, along with use of language in general. God initiates the practice in creation, and then promptly shares the privilege with man - the DIVINE LOGOS extending his reason and language as a central feature into him who was made in his image. Male and female he created them... that they could continue in the same manner, pro-creating and naming and calling by name... all KEY to living-out HIS blessing to them that they be

fruitful and multiply.

Scripturally and historically, there's repeatedly a vested interest over what individuals are to be called - consider the squabble over Zechariah and Elizabeth using a name from outside the family tradition. But for how true this is of man, how much more so of God? It clearly mattered to God that "Abram" become, both in deed AND in name, "Abraham" - not just an "exalted father," but the "father of many nations." God himself saw to it that Jacob (roughly meaning "deceiver") would instead come to be known as "Israel" - signifying a new relationship as the covenant people to the God of Truth... a name immortalized through the passing generations.

It's notable, though, that for his part, it also pleased the Lord to participate in this name-sharing and give HIS name UNTO his people. YHWH... the name given by God to Moses that his people might KNOW HIM, as the "I AM"... the God who "IS." A name by which lowly man may recognize him who is, otherwise, beyond all telling. A name by which the loving relationship between creator and creation could be restored... yet at the same time, a name to which every knee must surely bend in heaven and earth... even those of kings and mighty nations.

With all this in mind, it is of no insignificance that we hear from the book of Numbers concerning the Aaronic Benediction - prescribing that blessing be said, in clear speech, OVER the people... that the DIVINE NAME be placed UPON THEM. The people were thus given to wear the name that carries the baggage, as it were, of salvific power and grace - in these words, the same YHWH who delivered his people from bondage... now promising to keep them further unto ETERNITY; the same YHWH whose appearing at by the dark of night once spelled doom for the Egyptian firstborns... now radiating comfort and joy upon his own beloved children; the same YHWH whose countenance beheld the drowning of hard-hearted Pharaoh and all his hosts... turning to his own people with a smile of peace.

Of course, it was a name WHOLLY ATTACHED TO THE BLESSINGS OF A GREATER and OLDER COVENANT - the covenant sealed in ancient times through the rite of circumcision. By it, men were marked as ones who belonged - along with the women of their households - to the house and family of ABRAHAM, that divinely-named "father of nations." Thus were the sons of Israel entered into a "blood-oath" of sorts - in this rite, sin still exacting a temporal and painful price,

yet this even more pointing to how the price was to be paid IN FULL one day through the pain and blood of a Redeemer - indeed, by the Lord YHWH himself, who in fashion even more grand than in Egypt, would work salvation for his people FROM THE BONDAGE OF SIN AND DEATH.

And so, with the turning of history's sacred pages, it happened. HE came... the Redeemer, as heralded by an angel to a devout man... a son of Israel who went by the name Joseph. This angel bid Joseph courage in taking Mary to be his wife... and in taking guardianship of the son she already bore in her womb, seeing to it that this child, conceived by the Holy Spirit, would receive the name which, from that day forward, would be exalted above all others.

The promised child's journey towards salvation largely began with the events described in our one-verse gospel account... with the rite of circumcision. Still a tender newborn, fresh from the manger, at 8-days old (imagine a child, BORN JUST THIS PAST CHRISTMAS EVE!) yet already submitting to the LAW - shedding what was to be THE blood of the covenant SO THAT THE ANCIENT RITE, with all its promises and meanings, might reach glorious completion. And with it, in accordance with custom, Joseph's responsibility, as ordered by the angel: "His name shall be called YESHUA (a name which means YHWH SAVES), for he WILL SAVE his people from their sins."

In Christ's circumcision, the key elements of RITE, BLESSING, and even NAME come together to be remade... or rather, perhaps, redefined for us. The ancient law departs - in this early rite, and ultimately through the atoning sacrifice to come in our Lord's passion and death. By this rite, the name once placed upon the people is brought to an even greater COMPLETION - YHWH giving way to the more "fleshed out," as it were, Yeshua... coming to us today in the English form we know: "Jesus." Thus will YOU ALSO receive this name again shortly - echoing the prescribed text of the Aaronic Blessing, but heard now fully, in light of the Blessed Trinity - the "name of Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" placed upon YOU.

Likewise, in Baptism - the NEW rite of the covenant, a circumcision of the heart, made without hands - Jesus' name (the name of divine power and grace) is made yours, to call upon in prayer, to meetly and rightly give thanks and praise. And all this in the spirit of the great exchange, where YOU RECEIVE JESUS' name (with all its holiness and righteousness) and HE takes YOURS. Yes, even YOUR

name... whether you like it or not, whether you know its meaning for your life or are content leave such things to God's wisdom... he takes it for inclusion in the book of life, ensuring us a place among the heavenly host, clad in white, blessed to shine before the light of his countenance forever.

What's in a name? In the eyes of our Lord, surely a great deal. Precious in his sight are the deaths of his saints - saints he knows BY NAME... including YOU. Precious, in coming into our lowly estate and taking up our flesh and fulfilling all righteousness, was the taking up of A NAME... denoting a rose of sweeter smell than all others, whose fragrance fills the air with the peace of godly reconciliation. May WE TOO live in this sweet, saving name of Jesus... the hope anticipated in ages past, enfolding us now and in years to come in his own holy light and power.

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Preached by Rev. Christopher Clark

Sermon Texts: Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 2:21.