

Sermon for the Feast of the Circumcision & Name of Jesus

His name was called Jesus.'

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A name is a peculiar thing, or at least, they were. Names are not merely a title for a person. There are many titles for a person. Him. Her. This guy. Our friend. That jerk at the gas station. Your mother. My stupid sister. These are not names. They are titles. All of these refer to individuals, at least in the context in which they are spoken.

A name is a peculiar thing, or least, they were. For names do not allow you to speak about a person. They allow you to speak to a person; or more specifically. They allow you to call upon a person.

In ages past, a name was not casually given out. One did not meet another in the market and nonchalantly say, 'I am Susan.' Or 'I am John.' It was only after a relationship of friendship and trust was established, that you would render your name to another, as a gift.

[Though I am not prone to make analogies to modern things, since I am an elitist', I will say] To give out one's name in the past is much like giving out your phone number today. You meet a man on the street that chats you up. He asks your name; you tell him. He tells you his hard luck story or what not. You say 'that's terrible' and 'I'm sorry.' It is all amicable. Then he asks 'Hey, can I have your number?' It's then that your heart rate speeds up. It is then, that you your mind starts racing. Is he your friend? Do you know him? Do you care about him? Do you want to give him your number? All of which, is just to ask, do you want to allow him to call upon you?

It is then, when you are speaking to the strange, the beggar, the homeless man, or just to anyone you are not particularly sure of,

that you nervously announce, in the most polite way you can, that you don't give out your number to just anyone; that your number is private; that it is just for family. It is then that you say, as nicely as you can: 'I am not your friend, I do not know you, Its not my place to take care of you.'

So it was with names of old. A name was not carelessly given out. It was given to those whom you had decided to befriend, decided to know, decided to care for. It was given so that they could call upon you. It was given so that you could be called upon, and respond.

Now remember our father in faith Moses, as he spoke to the bush enshrouded in flame; that tree filled with fire, but unconsumed; as strange as a torch burning in the water; as wonderful as a rose which blooms in the snow.

What burned within the wood of the bush, amidst the leaves of its foliage, was the glory of the God of grace; the all-consuming fire, which devours sacrifices of beast and fowl, of doves and bulls and lambs, but caresses the leaves of his tree without violence; which touches them without harm.

And Moses, being commanded by this glory, to go into the land of Egypt to declare God's liberation of his people, asks a question; a good question.

'When I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you, and they shall say to me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them?'

For *the God of your fathers*, like 'your sister' or 'his best friend', is not a name. It is a title. Moses does not ask for God's title. He asks God: 'What is your name?' How shall they call upon you? How shall they beg your mercy? How shall they praise their deliverer? How shall they adore their God? How shall they speak to you? How shall they befriend you? 'What is your name?' *'What shall I say unto them?'*

The LORD answers: *'I AM THAT I AM [...] Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.'*

Much can be said about what God's name means, of what the four letters which comprise his name reveal. But first, we must learn what it means that God gave his name at all.

To give his name is not merely to offer the word by which he can be referred to. In giving his name, God has declared to Israel *'I am your God, and you are my people.'* Therefore *'Call upon the name of the Lord'* and *'I will save you in your time of need.'*

From this flows all the psalter and all wisdom:

'Give thanks unto the LORD, and call upon his name' 'For you, O Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee.' 'Because he has inclined His ear unto me, Therefore I shall call upon him as long as I live.' And 'follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them call upon the Lord out of a pure heart.'

For the Lord has commanded: *'Call upon Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver thee.'*

In the giving of his name, God has given himself, his love, his mercy, his power, his benevolence, to all who have faith in him, to all who would cry unto that name in their time of trouble, to all who would praise that name in their time of joy.

And that his name may ever be on your mouths, ever prayer by your lips, ever sung in every church, and beseeched in every liturgy, he commanded Aaron, even as he commands his Church now: *'Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons saying: In this way you shall bless the children of Israel [...] The Lord shall bless you, and keep you. The Lord shall make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord will lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.'* And the priests shall put MY NAME upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.'

Indeed, to have the name of the Lord is to be blessed, for every blessing comes from calling upon the name of the Lord.

But what does this name mean? *I AM*. What does this mean? He is? He is what? Surely he always is, he is forever, he is him who was,

who is, and ever shall be. He is eternal, and before anything was, as the Lord says, *I AM*.

But what does this name mean? He is what?

There is no telling, for our God from the flame of the bush revealed nothing else to Moses. Only *I AM*.

The name of God, as it is written in the Hebrew, lacks any vowels. The four consonants of his name are given, but never, in any place, in the entire Old Testament, the vowels. This means that his name cannot be pronounced, it cannot be said. No one dared utter those dreadful syllables of power. How, then, are we to call upon a name that we cannot say? How are we to call upon *I AM*, when we do not know what he is?

Now there is another name, of which you know very well. That name is Jesus. In Hebrew, the name 'Jesus' contains the four letters of the name of God revealed to Moses from the Bush. Yet added to those four letters, are added three more. Those letters spell the word 'salvation.' Therefore, the name of Jesus is not a mere name. It is not even a special name. It is the completion of that name that began to be revealed from the burning bush. '*The Word was made flesh*', and that Word is the name of God, now completed, that we may call upon it, and most importantly, that we may know not only that God is *I AM*, but that we may know what he is. In Christ, he has completed his name, that we may know what he is. '*I AM*' 'You are what?' '*I AM SALVATION*.' This is the sermon contained in the single word of the name of the *Word made flesh*. In him is every deliverance from all evil. May his name be always called upon. By his name, may we be saved.

Today is the Feast of the Circumcision and Naming of Our Lord, cradled in the season of Christmas. Our Gospel reading is but a single verse. To many, it seems silly to celebrate what seems to us an archaic, and even barbaric ceremony, that of circumcision, and of naming. But it is no small thing that has occurred, for now you know who God is. Now we see the Lord whom we shall call upon, our infant God, born of Mary, to pray, praise, and give thanks, to receive our everlasting salvation, to receive our unending joy.

Who is this, to whom you pray? Who is this, who has sent you as a light to this passing world, who has sent you to enlighten the everlasting mansions of heaven? Indeed, what shall you say to the company of apostles and martyrs, and all the saints and angels of light, when you come before the gates of heaven, when they ask *'Who is it that sent you unto us?' 'What is his name?' 'Thus shall you say unto the children of Israel?' 'I AM SALVATION hath sent me unto you.'*

'And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called Jesus.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Numbers

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