

Sermon 110      Holy Name of Jesus   January 1, 2017  
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Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.

The name we receive is the name that the majority of us carry with us throughout our lives. There are a few exceptions. “When Michael Keaton accepted the Best Actor Golden Globe for ‘Birdman’, he told the crowd that his birth name was actually Michael Douglas. He changed his name early in his career to avoid confusion with the actor Michael Douglas. He is believed to have chosen Keaton because of Buster Keaton.” But this is the exception and not the rule.

In my case, it almost became the exception also. When my mother was carrying me, according to family folklore, my father was reading the funny papers in the Sunday newspaper and came to Steve Canyon, a comic strip about an adventurer of the same name. He asked Jean if there was anyone in the Allen or Darby family named “Steve”? And so that is how I was named. Later, upon hearing this story, I told my father that I was very glad that he did not read “Dagwood and Blondie” first; I would never have forgiven him if I had been named Dagwood.

But in the matter of the naming of Jesus there was no debate. The angel Gabriel was very clear and succinct: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call his name JESUS.”

Whether we keep our birth name or change it, we cannot erase our lineage. All of us have a point of origin that can be traced. Alison will agree with me that her Aunt, my sister Lynne, gave her the best Christmas gift. She put together a memory book containing the Darby family tree showing our origins in Salisbury, England. She inserted early photographs of multiple generations that represent our history. Alison was quite taken by the effort that Lynne put into it and especially what the book represents.

The Reverend Rick Morley is an Episcopal priest at St. Marks in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. This how he describes the naming of Jesus and what it represents.

“And he was called Jesus.

It’s a peculiarity that Christianity as we know it came through the furnace of the Latin speaking Roman Empire that we call the Son of God “Jesus.”

Unless the Angel Gabriel spoke in Latin to the Virgin Mother, he told her to name him “Yeshua,” or “Joshua.”

Recovering the Savior’s Hebrew name we can find riches previously unavailable to us.

For “Joshua” is both a harkening back, and a glance down the road, all at once.

“Joshua” should immediately recall the great patriarch, who picked up Moses’ mantle. It was Joshua who finished Moses’ job. It was Joshua who finished the journey of the Exodus.

It was Joshua who brought the Children of Israel into the Promised Land.

Let that sink in for a moment.

And, “Joshua,” or “Yeshua,” has meaning to. It means “God saves.”

In a name, “Joshua,” and it’s Latin cousin “Jesus,” both points back to the saving acts of God in ages past AND points forward to the saving acts which will in years to come (after his circumcision and naming in the Book of Luke) occur on Golgotha and in an empty tomb.

A rose by any other name would still be a rose. But, this rose (e’re blooming?) has a name which is meant to signal to us all who He is, Who sent Him, Who acts, and who will save us all.”

In Jesus, we relive the history from the Old Testament up to his birth and death and resurrection. But the name Jesus is unlike our name in that it defines the person. We hear in Paul’s Letter to the Church at Philippi the following: “Therefore, God also highly exalted 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, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father.”

The naming of Jesus and the affirmation that his name is above every other name put Paul in a very bad place. Marcus Borg reminds us that “Jesus is Lord was an anti-imperial statement. It denied the central claim of imperial theology: ‘if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not.’” The name “Jesus” had far reaching impact on the politics and culture of the day and in the passage of time little has changed.

A year has not gone by when we our faith is not challenged by rulings and declarations that run counter to the name Jesus. Political forces run counter to Jesus and the Kingdom of God. The

Right Reverend N. T. Wright, in his book "Simply Christian", reflects on what the name Jesus and the his kingdom means: "With Jesus....we are all invited – summoned, actually – to discover, through following Jesus, that this new world is indeed a place of justice, spirituality, relationship, and beauty, and that we are not only to enjoy it as such but to work at bringing it to birth on earth as in heaven. In Jesus, we discover whose voice it is that has echoed around the hearts and minds of the human race all along."

The birth of Jesus Christ and his naming gives us a pause to reflect on where we are in the Kingdom. On this Sunday, the Holy Name of Jesus, let us think about our own birth and naming and our striving to "Love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind and our neighbor as ourselves."

Let us pray.

THOU SON OF THE Most High, Prince of Peace, be born again into our world. Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness, wherever there is no hope, come, thou long-expected one, with healing in thy wings.

Holy Child, whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, thou blessed one, with healing in thy wings.

Saviour, be born in each of us who raises his face to thy face, not knowing fully who he is or who thou art, knowing only that thy love is beyond his knowing and that no other has the power to make him whole. Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for thee even though he has forgotten thy name. Come quickly. Amen.