

Sermon for The Holy Name
St John's, Gloucester
1-1-2023
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Good Morning—Happy New Year--to all of you—
And though it is New Year's Day,
today we're going to celebrate another Feast as well,
this one from the early days of Jesus' life. His Name Day.
I love that we're beginning the New Year with a story about new life,
with all the possibilities and hope and joy any new baby brings.
And very sweetly, our Gospel lesson for this day
takes us back to the Christmas readings,
with the shepherd's wonder of finding Jesus in the manger,
their amazement, Mary's treasuring their stories of angels,
and pondering them in her heart,
their felt sense of the glory of God,
and their desire to praise God with what they've heard and seen.

As a mother and a grandmother, I love the feelings expressed here—
the sense of God's nearness at the beginning of a new life.
When I was serving a congregation, we loved having babies around
at Christmas time.
It was always exciting to see if
anyone would have a baby at Christmas,
especially one who could play Jesus in the Christmas pageant.
The child playing Jesus was usually the youngest member of the congregation.
And sometimes baby Jesus was two or three years old.
But some years we were lucky enough to have little ones only a few months old.
The best part of that came after church, downstairs at coffee hour.
We would gather around those Christmas babies, admiring tiny toes and fingers,
Oooing and ahing, and taking a little hand in ours,
looking into their soft eyes, passing the baby around to each other.
I loved those times—
Every baby I've ever met evokes
some of the laughter and praise those shepherds felt,
and as a mother, some of the wonder Mary and Joseph felt—
Here is a new person, a new mystery,
a unique and beautiful being entrusted to us,
deserving every bit of wonder and joy that Jesus received in his manger so long ago,
each as precious as the other, their beautiful eyes and faces, and bodies,
beloved and blest wondrous tiny beings that they are.
Maybe that's part of the point of the story,
that we might see, that we are invited to see
the divine and human possibilities in every person,

that we're invited to the care and compassion for every small being entrusted to us, as Mary and Joseph were invited to shelter and nurture Jesus.

You'll notice a sentence added at the end of the Gospel lesson today:
"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."
Most of us name our own children—but Jesus' name is given to him by God—
Jesus, can mean, the savior, or the deliverer—
but in a more concrete translation—it means the one who leads us into the wide places, the one who leads us into expansiveness, into an open field.
This is God's name for this tiny being, who comes, so frail and vulnerable—so in need of our care.
Sometimes our destiny is in our name—sometimes not,
For Jesus, his name was about his calling, the one who delivers us always from constriction into freedom, from death to life.

Mary and Joseph, Luke wants us to understand, were observant parents, observant of Jewish custom, but more, they listened to what God desired for them, for their child, even to the child's name. And they brought him to be circumcised. I read in one of our Jewish prayer books, there's a blessing in contemporary Jewish circumcision rites—when the baby is brought forward, those who are assembled, say, "Blessed is he who arrives."
A joyful affirmation—blessed are you who have arrived. I'm wondering this morning, as we reflect on the gift of Jesus' name, what name God might have given each of us? We have names from our parents, we might have received baptismal names in addition to our birth names, perhaps we've renamed ourselves. Or we have secret names for ourselves, or we've imagined, what would be my name if I could choose one? Perhaps we've been through transformations, new births and rebirths, And kept our given names through our lives, though our interior life has changed. Our names carry our histories, everything we've been through. I'm wondering this morning if anyone here knows the history of their name and what it means? What does your name mean? (asking for examples from congregation) My name is Anne, and it means Grace. If we had more time, we might explore the meanings of our names and how they have come to have meaning in our lives.

We have our own names,

but for us, Jesus' name becomes part of our understanding of who we are too,
as individuals, as community, it's a name that reveals something of who God is.

By this name, we are received by God,
it's the name through which we become children of God,
the family name of all Christians.

In Galatians, Paul tells us by this name Jesus
we too, are invited into intimate relations with God,
calling God, Abba, Father, as Jesus.

We gather in Jesus name,
we hear the word, in his name, we baptize in his name,
drink and eat his Holy Supper, in his name,
love and serve our neighbors, near and far, in his name.

We hope all who have heard the name of Jesus
know that name stands for a God whose love knows no bounds.

This morning, as we begin a new year with the story of a new life,
I'm wondering what new life is being born in each of our lives,
what new and tender thing is coming toward us to be born in the world,
or appearing among us, what is vulnerable and in need of our care and protection?

What idea, what hope, what desire, what possibility?

What new life in us or between us, or among us deserves our wonder, love and praise?
And if Jesus' name is also our name, this name that means deliverer, the one who leads
us into the open spaces, what new place of freedom might God be leading us, inviting us
to enter as community, what open expanse, what wide field of joy might be opening up
for you, for me, for all of us, in this year of our Lord, 2023?