

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church
Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ
January 1, 2017
Text: Luke 2:15-21

Well, here we are on the first day of a brand new year! Happy New Year everyone! While the rest of society sleeps it off or is in recovery mode from a night of merrymaking, here we are this morning! Maybe a little blurry-eyed but we are here nevertheless. For some, the new year could not come fast enough while for others there is an attitude of gratitude for all that was in 2016. Hopefully this year will be a year of gratitude for all that it will bring!

Today is the unusual but beautiful Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our lectionary continues with the Christmas story with angels leaving the shepherds who had been watching their flock in the fields until they decide to go and see for themselves, the Baby born in a manger.

Luke, whose gospel was written so that non-Jews could understand it, then tells us that Joseph and Mary adhered to the ancient Law of Moses which mandated that on the eighth day all Jewish male newborns were to be circumcised and given their names. By being circumcised and named, the child was given his identity and became a member of the community. The rites also served to dedicate the child to God. So they took their eight day old son to the Temple to be circumcised and given his name—a name that in his day was a common name: Yeshua in Aramaic or Joshua in Hebrew. Jesus in Greek.

But this Child was no ordinary child and his Name had been given him before he was conceived. For the angel Gabriel had come from heaven to a young girl chosen to be the bearer of God's only Son. "The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." (Luke 1:30-31).

He, the little Child of Bethlehem, would prove to live into his name, Jesus, which means “to save.” A name to which “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

Though he lived as flesh and blood among the people of the earth, God’s Son never lorded himself over anyone already living in an occupied land. Rather he served others and showed others how we must serve too. Paul also reminds us that: “”And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” By his act the revelation of God also showed us the depth of God’s love for all humankind.

It may seem unusual or strange to us living in the 21st century to make a big deal about a name. Most parents though may give a lot of thought to the name they choose for their little ones. Some may ponder hundreds of names during pregnancy or as an adoption is pending. Very few of us dislike our names enough to change them though some do. We seem to make a bigger deal of what someone does for a living or if their name might be an in to situations that sometimes face us like when we are looking for the name of a good lawyer or mechanic, for example.

Still today, we are reminded of the Name above all other names.

There is a story that a young rabbi told of one of the first bar mitzvahs he ever performed. *It was for a boy named Louis. Louis was awkward and sad. His parents did little to encourage his self-esteem. They implied that Louis was much too dumb to learn the traditional Hebrew passages a boy recites for his bar mitzvah.*

The rabbi was determined to bring out the best in Louis. He spent extra time teach him the songs and prayers. He soon discovered that Louis was smart and had a fantastic singing voice. On the day of his bar mitzvah, Louis performed beautifully. At the end of the ceremony, the rabbi stood and spoke directly to Louis. He said, “Louis, this morning you met your real self. This is who you are. You are good, graceful, talented, and smart. Whatever people told you yesterday, and Louis, whatever happens tomorrow, promise me one thing. Remember...this is you. Remember, and don’t ever lose it.”

A few years later, Louis wrote to the rabbi. The boy whose parents predicted that he was too dumb to perform a traditional bar mitzvah was studying for his medical degree at an Ivy League university. He was also engaged to be married. Louis ended his letter by writing, "...I kept my promise-I always remembered my bar mitzvah morning when you said that this is who I am. For this, I thank you."

By the same token, you and I at our baptisms were given a new name and identities by water and the Spirit. You and I were reborn and made holy by the Word made flesh born in a lowly stable some 2,000 years ago. As one preacher put it: "...we are called by his name. We are Christians, or 'little Christs'. His name is our name also. It defines us; identifies us. And, like little Louis at his bar mitzvah, knowing who you really are is powerful, life changing stuff."*

This is us. This is who we are-"little Christs" in the world.

We don't know what the new year will bring for the world, the nation, the Church, for any of us. But as we begin another year, let us pray that God will make it holy. Let us pray that God will make it a year of peace. Let us pray that God will give us the strength and the power to go forth in the Holy Name of Jesus to be his hands and feet in the world. To show humankind through humble acts of service that Christmas isn't just a day or merely a season but that it comes every day through the actions of those who also seek to reveal God's love and presence to the world.

After this Eucharist, may we each go forth in the Name of Christ today and always! Amen!

Story taken from "The Holy Name of Jesus", a sermon written by Father R. Stephen Powers, SSC