

The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ
January 1, 2012
Luke 2:21

I have been part of a small pastoral support group for 2+ years now. It's named "Tending the Fire." We meet at Charlton City United Methodist Church monthly. Jerry, a retired UMC pastor and active pastoral counselor gave our group of six an interesting assignment for our December meeting. In the spirit of Christmas, we were to share family stories that were told about our own birth.

I remembered the story my mom told me years ago, but recently took the opportunity to ask dad what he remembered. He confirmed the fact that he was out on the golf course – Saucon Valley Country Club – when my mom went into labor. He had the car. At the time they lived in a small rented house north of Bethlehem, PA. Of course the golf course was south of town. St. Luke's Hospital was in Bethlehem. So, once they located dad on the course it was a mad dash south to north and then south again to the hospital. Mom said that she very nearly didn't make it, which reminded Ray and I of Andrew's (our third child) rapid arrival! I didn't share with the group about my name – "Mary." Mom didn't have too much to say about that. It is curious that my younger sister's (by 13 years) name is Martha. Little could mom and dad know how later our personalities mirrored those of Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha. It's very interesting how we grow into our given names. I commend this activity to you while we are still in Christmastide. Recall family stories that are told about your birth. In the spirit of our feast day today – The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ – do a little investigation into your own name which was a gift given to you.

And now, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.
Luke 1:31 – spoken to Mary

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Matthew 1:21 – spoken to Joseph

Now that Ray and I (and Jerry and Bobbie) are very much looking forward to becoming grandparents for the first time, I have a renewed interest in the naming process.

I've come to learn that in traditional societies, and particularly in the Old Testament, names were much more important than they are today. If for us personal names are little more than labels, in the Old Testament, names express a person's character and destiny, at least, as the parents perceive them. In the case of Jesus' name which was given by the angel Gabriel, His name was a divinely guaranteed statement about His identity and future destiny.

I did a little research into the name, Jesus. One source reported that 'Jesus' is a Greek form of 'Joshua,' which means 'Yahweh [God] is salvation.' Another source said that Hebrew and Aramaic forms of the word 'Jesus' and 'he will save' are similar. So clearly, the angel's announcement to Joseph concerning the birth and naming of Mary's child is prophetic.

... you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Matthew 1:21

I am relatively certain that most of you could explain to me in some fashion or other – in a few words or many words – what ‘salvation’ means. Our creeds – Apostles and Nicene – address what we as Christians believe. Our Catechism (848-850, Book of Common Prayer) gives us our Episcopalian slant on ‘salvation.’

But as present day testimony to the reality of the salvation that Jesus offers to each one of us, exactly what does this activity of god TODAY offer us? What do we personally have to say about the difference Jesus’ offer of salvation has made to us today? Our telling of the stories of old becomes barren if they do not provoke memories of present day experiences that can only be named as the present saving acts of God as revealed in Jesus.

And it’s just here that I must borrow some poetry from the pen of John Newton (1725-1807), the famous ex-slave transporter who wrote ‘Amazing Grace.’

*How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ear!
It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away our fear.*

*It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast;
‘tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary, rest.*

Hymnal#466

To know and experience the name of Jesus as salvation, you must deeply experience your own powerlessness over people and situations. Each of us comes to that brick wall in our own particular way. I can’t name that impenetrable barrier for you, but I have a clearer sense of what it is for me as your pastor.

Our parish at the beginning of 2012 is in a very precarious place. I sensed this last year and wrote about it in the Annual Meeting reports. I know from the view of sheer ‘energy expended’ standpoint that I am nose-to-nose with my brick wall. God has me in a place of powerlessness. Actually, that’s an excellent place to be – the very best place to be. I am in a place at the beginning of 2012 to really experience in a deep way my need of God’s salvation. God will strengthen, direct and save me in the present moment if I quiet down and listen for His direction.

How can I, how can we hear God’s word of direction? How can we allow Jesus to be our communal and individual Savior as we enter 2012 with hopeful anticipation?

Listen to what Peter said about Jesus to the council in Acts 5:31.

God exalted him [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.

For myself, I think an excellent and necessary way to begin this New Year will be with a humble spirit on my knees in confession. What exactly in my own life – by word and deed – has blocked God’s Word of strength and direction? Believe me, these words of personal confession are not far from my thoughts most days. What behaviors as individuals and a parish need to be repented of – need to be replaced in this New Year so that we resemble more the Body of Christ God created us to be?

...you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Matthew 1:21

May it be so!

*Dear Name, the rock on which I build, my shield and hiding-place,
my never-failing treasury, filled with boundless stores of grace!*

*Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought;
but when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.*

Hymnal #466