

**January 2, 2012- Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Park City, UT
Gospel: Luke 2: 15-21**

The Feast celebrated in the Episcopal Church on January 1st is called the Holy Name of Jesus. It will have been eight days since the birth of Christ and Scripture tells us that the Holy Family kept Jewish tradition in naming Jesus on the eighth day. This Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus been celebrated by the Christian Church since at least the sixth century.

There are two main events mentioned in today's gospel:

- 1. the naming of the infant Jesus;**
- 2. circumcision, the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham 'and his children for ever', thus Christ's keeping of the Law**

While names are important, even today, one can't help but ask why is the naming of Jesus so important that it rates a day of special celebration by the church?

In our personal lives, when the name of a person we know is mentioned, an image of the person arises, along with any emotional responses we have to that person, be they positive or negative or mixed which indicates the meaning or importance in our lives.

In Literature, names can tell us a lot about people's characters and the roles they play in a story. One of the pleasures of reading literature is discovering the meaning of characters' names. Authors will often give their characters names that tell us something important about who they are and about what they will do in the story.

In the Bible names also indicate who that person is in their deepest identity. Adam expressed his identity of caretaker of creation by naming the animals. God refused to limit his identity when Moses asked who should I say sent me to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He only said, "I am who I am." Jesus himself refused to define exactly who he was, embodied himself in the unnamable eternal God when he said , "Before Abraham was, I am."

We do not really grasp the significance of this Biblical naming in American culture today. Even today, there is power in knowing a name or in naming something. The closest we often get to that power in modern American life is recognizing the power of identity theft. With your name and social security number, I gain some power over you – I become you. In Biblical understanding, a person's name was their identity and indicated their place in the true story of the coming of God's kingdom, their identity within God's plan of grace and compassionate justice for the world.

1. The name of Jesus:

The angel Gabriel told Jesus' human parents to name him "Jesus," which means "the Lord helps" or "the Lord saves." Jesus' name tells us something important about Jesus' character and the role in the story of God's love for the world. The name 'Jesus' shows us a God who is both powerful, mighty, inaccessible and yet is intimately with us . Jesus is "Emmanuel", "God with us", the Lord who helps us to be who we are intended to be. To the glorious music of Messiah we sing, "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." Jesus is named "the Light of the World", the "Lamb of God", and the "Bread of Life", "Savior." He is called God's "Beloved Child". He is also called the "Man of Sorrows" and "the Wounded Healer." The name of Jesus embodies all

those “Many Selves.” They offer us clues to his identity, not conclusions.

“Jesus.” When you think about it--about all the implications--this is an extraordinary and audacious name to give to a tiny baby!

It is also an extraordinary and audacious plan to save the world through a vulnerable, flesh-and-blood human being. This audacity of God’s plan continues in our own naming in baptism. In a sense, it is in that ritual that we are named “Christian”. From that time forward we are identified with Jesus and his story. In baptism, our name is given, we are anointed with oil and it is announced that we are marked as God’s own, God’s own beloved child. In Baptism, by the Holy Name of Jesus, we claim our true identities as children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, empowered to receive all of its opportunities and responsibilities. Baptism is the sign of our own covenantal relationship with God.

2. Covenant

For Mary and Joseph, the sign of the Jewish people’s covenantal relationship with God was the ritual of circumcision. It was a sign of God’s commitment to them and of their commitment to God. So, in obedience to Jewish law, Mary and Joseph had baby Jesus circumcised on the eighth day after he was born. In the ritual, circumcision becomes the physical sign of his participation in God’s covenant with them. What is often overlooked in this story is the wounding of the baby by His circumcision. It can be seen as a sign pointing toward Jesus’ wounding on the cross and of his healing in Resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot help but remember the story of Jacob who wrestled with God, was blessed and yet limped away, wounded by the encounter. We cannot help but remember that we too are sometimes blessed and wounded in our own encounters with God and others who love us.

Nevertheless, this whole ritual is a sign of the mutual, committed eternal love relationship between the child, his family and God.

Mary and Joseph’s adherence to the Jewish law is a reminder to us that Jesus was indeed a thoroughly Jewish man: He lived, he embodied God’s covenant with the Jewish people. He observed the Law; went to the festivals; paid the tax which supported the Temple in Jerusalem; went to synagogue services regularly; he even taught people to do what the Pharisees said. Jesus was faithful to God in all the very concrete and particular ways of everyday life. He was faithful not to the “letter of the law”, the legalism, but rather to the heart of the Jewish law: You shall love God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus practiced, he modeled the love of God which is for all people, in all times and in all places. That love was not a set of principles, of proper “belief”, but a love expressed in a life lived in all its fullness.

Both in the life and teachings of Jesus and later the later Christian disciples and communities there are compelling examples of practicing one’s faith not only with good deeds and moral behavior, but also, at the same time, practicing one’s faith through personal spiritual disciplines, including regularly sharing in the life of ones spiritual community.

There is a part of us that thinks that it seems unreasonable or even silly to suggest that simply physically showing up regularly at church makes some kind of difference to our spiritual well-being. However, not only do we have the example of Jesus and his immediate followers; we

have the evidence of our own lives. We know that the habit of working on a particular skill or capacity like skiing or playing the piano, or playing bridge on a regular basis, inevitably makes us better at what we are doing.

Habits make things into a vital part of our lives—whatever it is. The same goes with our life of worship and growing in relationship with God. It's important as a way of training our bodies, of forming minds and souls to conform our identity as followers of Jesus.

May we, who bear the name of Jesus as Christians, be empowered to embody the love and compassion of the God who also calls each of us--by name!