

## **Feast of the Holy Name**      *“What’s in a Name?”*

*“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”*  
(Luke 1:26)

Names are important. Advertisers and Marketers know that what you name something can be crucial to its success. The really successful brand names become generic names of the product. Examples of this include: Xerox – what we call copying; Band-Aid; the adhesive bandage that covers small wounds. I’m sure you can think of some others. The effect of a good name is that it seeps into the culture and becomes a part of it.

Personal names are no less significant. Any parent knows of the kind of energy that goes into naming a child. There is much to be thought about: important ancestors in the family; how the name sounds with the family name; what the name means – its original source. In the Roman Catholic tradition, a child carries at least one name of a saint, in order to hopefully identify that child with the kind of Christian life lived by that saint. (How many of you have saints’ names?)

My baptismal name was Patricia Frances Rome. Even though my mother denied it, I claimed to have been named after her two sisters, Patricia and Frances. I particularly identified with Patricia (who we just memorialized in November) because of her strong independent spirit and life. My saints were Patrick and Francis – both men who followed particularly spiritual paths. I think that it’s not a coincidence that I am attracted to Celtic spirituality and the simplicity of a life lived in service to others (Franciscan).

All that is by way of saying that names have a certain power. They are important. Even though as children we might have said, “Sticks and stones will break my bones but names/words will never hurt me”, we all know that’s not true. I’ll never forget the morning that I walked out of my house and someone had written in chalk on the street in front of the house – Fat Pat. What we call someone, whether an actual name, can be hurtful and carry wounds far worse than a broken bone.

Names can and do change. In the Bible, names change when people intentionally engage in God’s mission. Abram becomes Abraham; Sarai become Sarah; Simon becomes Peter; Saul becomes Paul. Today, in our culture, women still change their last names to signify a new relationship of marriage to identify a common family, though that custom is changing. Some young people change their names when they become adults to signify their new identity. How many of you here have ever changed your name? What has that meant to you?

Every January 1, the church observes the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. And this year that day falls on Sunday – a happy occurrence! Before he was known as the Christ, or “the bread of life” or the “son of Man” or the “Suffering Servant”, he was called simply “Jesus”. And apparently, according to two separate gospels (Luke and Matthew), the name was given to his parents by an angel. The name was God’s name for him. What an interesting and exciting conversation Joseph and Mary must have had when they discovered that the same name had been given to them – how right that must have felt. I wonder what would happen if we, as we are naming our children, asked God what the name should be?

His name is “Jesus”, not “Immanuel” as Isaiah (7:14) suggests and is often read at Christmas time. Matthew refers to that name in linking Jesus to the Isaiah prophecy, for Jesus is the fulfillment of that long awaited promise. Nor was he called “Wonderful Counselor, “Almighty God”, “Everlasting Father”, “Prince of Peace” – also names from Isaiah (9:6). Those were to come later.

His Hebrew name is Joshua or, more accurately, *Yehoshuah*, meaning “*Yahweh is salvation.*” More recently writers have reclaimed this ancient name by referring to Jesus as Yeshua. You may remember that Joshua is the one who led the Hebrews into the promised Land. So, even then, his parents would have imagined that he was to have an important role.

As special as the name sounds to us, you’d think the angel would have chosen a better name, because it was very common, like naming a boy John or David, or Sam. There were lots of Yehoshuahs running around. Why would such a plain, ordinary name be chosen for such a special child?

And we could also ask why would God choose such plain ordinary people as parents and an ordinary small town whose only significance was that David once resided there? Why would the message of this holy birth be shared with ordinary shepherds? Part of the story is connection with prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But, I think there is more to it than that. What is Luke telling us about this boy now named Jesus? Is he really like other boys who run and play, get into mischief, learn scripture, annoy parents and other siblings with all kinds of questions and maybe even pranks? Yes! This Jesus is one of us! (so Immanuel – God with us, fits!). And that’s the point, of course, God is to be found among us. The God who brings us back together into wholeness is present and active in ordinary human life. That’s what the common name of Jesus says and means.

The name of Jesus came to have particular significance because of who the man became and what he taught and how he lived out Yahweh’s mission to love the world. Jesus came to be called “holy” and therefore, as Philippians says, to have a particular power and influence over us whenever it is said and heard. Contrary to popular use, of course, it is not meant to be used a curse word. I’ve never quite understood the attraction of using it that way and I mentally say a blessing to the person who uses Jesus name in an unholy way. There is much more possibility in verbally saying the name of Jesus.

In the name of Jesus, ever since his resurrection, we find the power and love of God – God to save us in times of trouble, to be with us at all times, to heal us in all the ways we need. In Galatians (3:27), Paul says that we are all baptized in his name and therefore now linked with the Jesus and the power of God resides in us, through his name.

Some of you have been present when I’ve talked about the new name given to us at Baptism. It is the other name associated with Jesus – Christ. Christ is not his last name but rather a descriptor of who Jesus was, is and continues to be through us. Christ means “anointed one”. He is the one supersaturated with love – the love and freedom that we are given in our baptism.

So, all baptized Christians could take his name as a part of the family, indeed, the body of Christ. We have Jean Christ, Sheila Christ, Jim Christ, Maude Christ, Bob Christ, Paul Christ, Kathy Christ and so on.

So, what's in a name? If the name of Jesus is holy and to be said with reverence and awe, doesn't that make our names holy, too?

What if we said the name of Jesus with intention as a holy name to be called upon? And what if we said, in the next breath, our names with the same sense of holiness and reverence? As we revere Jesus, we can also revere each other.

How would our lives and the lives of those around us be different? Do we dare?

Amen.

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January 1, 2012