

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith  
Holy Comforter  
Richmond, VA  
The Holy Name; January 1, 2017  
Readings: Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21.

## What's in a Name?

Last week, we left our story with Mary pondering in her heart all that she had heard and experienced.

On this day, we celebrate the Holy Name--Jesus--and we hear,

“After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus...”

After all that had transpired, the shocking and amazing things---the message from the angels that God had come to dwell with humanity---and this Emmanuel

would be found in a manger having just been born, a baby boy....

After all this, Mary and Joseph do as the law, the traditions of the people, instructed them-- they want to the Temple to have Jesus circumcised, eight days after his birth, and as part of that ritual, he received the name of “Jesus.”

How did Mary and Joseph go on living after all the angels, the shepherds and the Wise Men?

They lived the life they were born to live; and as religious people--they did the next thing that was to be done.

I find something about that comforting.

There is a lot to be said for sticking with tradition and observing one's religious practices when pondering great things in one's heart.

Until the *1979 Book of Common Prayer*, this day was called the "Feast of the Circumcision" but now we call it "Holy Name Day."

Both aspects of the event are important.

In having Jesus circumcised, his parents were binding him to God and their people in a most important way.

"Circumcision of the male child marked his acceptance into the covenant community (Gen 17:9-14). Both rites circumcision and naming, gave the child an identity."<sup>1</sup>

But we are also reminded that the giving of the name came from an angel...from God..by way of an angel, "And you shall name him Jesus because he will save his people."

The name meaning, "God will save."

---

<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol IX, p. 69.

Therefore, the eighth day in Jesus' life was like that of every Jewish male and yet, this ritual was different in that Joseph did not give the name, God did. On the eighth day, Jesus, was firmly grounded in past and in the future.

Our parish retreat this past year was all about names.

*What's in a name?*

As we considered on the retreat, our names can define us but don't have to...some of us use names other than our given names because we identify with a different name more than our own.

We had a great time hearing about each other's names; the history, often family history behind them.

Sometimes we grow into our names.

I disliked my name very much as a little girl.

When I was about four, I remember telling my mother that my name, "Hilary", was the name of an old woman.

She laughed and said, "it will be one day."

I also didn't like my middle name for a long time.

The "B" stands for "Borbon," from the Spanish by way of Costa Rica; and that seemed very different than all of my classmates growing up in Virginia in the 1970s.

Now I like both my first and middle names very much...but I had to grow into them.

I appreciate my Latino background/ethnicity much more now than when was young.

And "Smith," well---that always seemed kind of boring; until I learned that my great-great grandfather and his family come to the US in the 1890s to escape persecution in Russia because they were Jewish, and so when they got here, they changed our name from "Schuster" to "Smith."

If my name had been "Hilary Schuster," I wonder if my life would have been different...maybe I would be a Rabbi now!

If my grandfather or my father's last name had been "Schuster," I wonder if our lives would have been different...probably, in some good and perhaps not so good ways.

Names are important.

They tell people who we are...mostly that is good, but at various points in history having a certain name was dangerous...and still can be.

I wonder of Jesus always liked his name?

He had to grow into it. ---in his humanity.

And he did.

These early stories of Jesus only make sense when we look back from the vantage point of the Cross and Easter Day.

What happened so long ago continues to have a lot of power...everyone knows the name of Jesus. That can be good and that can be bad.

Many of us are here in the Episcopal Church because we didn't like how the name of Jesus was used in other churches...not as the name of Love, but as the name of Judgment.

And so now some have anxiety or a negative reaction when the name of Jesus is used more than is necessary.

But we celebrate Holy Name Day because the name of Jesus is the name of love and grace.

We can have that name; we can embrace his name; because through Jesus, God has embraced us...and will never let us go....this is what we call "salvation."

For those who have had negative experiences with Christians or a church or a person who used the name of Jesus as a weapon, hearing his name does not elicit joy or peace.

When we go out as people of this name into the world, we

help God change that through our words and actions.

We don't have to preach or convince, we just walk in the way of Jesus, and it makes a difference...maybe more people can hear the Holy Name and know the power of the love behind it because of how we have represented his name.

And when we know the love of God because a baby was born who was named Jesus...and he lived into that name...Paul's words to the Philippians are true...

From the Letter to the Philippians we hear, "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend...every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Not just because there was a man named Jesus, but because people saw the salvation of God come among them through him.

Jesus had to do a lot to grow into that name; and he did, for us; to the glory of God.

Amen.