

“What’s In A Name?”

Luke 2:21

January 1, 2017

Circumcision and Name of Jesus

New Year’s Day is a day that can be used for several purposes. New Year’s Day can be a day for celebrating the dawn of a new year with parades, football bowl games, and so on. New Year’s Day can also be a day for recovering from celebrating the end of the old year with sleep, aspirin, and hangovers. The Church, however, has a holiday on January 1st that coincides with New Year’s Day but has nothing at all to do with it. It’s called The Circumcision and Name of Jesus. It is not a festival that spawns lights, decorations, parties, drinking, or football games. But it should be a cause for great celebration and jubilation.

Luke writes in our Gospel reading for today, “And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” In those days, a baby wasn’t officially named until eight days after his birth at the time of his circumcision. We see a remnant of that tradition in our baptismal ceremony where parents are asked, “How shall this child be named?” even though the baby was given a name on the day he was born.

In our day and age, we not only name our babies earlier, but also for different reasons. We might choose a name that has been in our family. Prospective parents will also pour over “baby name books” to find a name that sounds right. Today, it also seems that parents choose names on the basis of how unique and different the name sounds.

However, in Biblical times, a name was chosen on the basis of its meaning. The meaning of the name would say something about the person. The Bible is full of such examples. God changed Abram’s name to Abraham which meant “father of many nations” as a sign of what He would do through Abraham. Abraham’s son was called Isaac which means “he laughs” because both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the prospect of having a baby when he was 100 and she was 90. The name would be a constant reminder of the fulfillment of God’s promise.

The child of Mary would not receive a family name or a name from a baby name book, but a name that had meaning - a name directly commanded by God. Before this child was even conceived, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.” (Luke 1:31). The angel also appeared to Joseph and gave further clarification as to why this specific name was chosen by God for His Son to be born of Mary. The angel said to Joseph, “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

The name “Jesus” literally means, “The Lord saves.” God chose that name because His Son would save people, but from what? The Messiah did not come primarily to save people from their economic, social, or political woes. Those are merely side effects of a much more serious problem and that is the reason He came. He came to save people from their sins.

If people didn’t sin, then God’s Son would never have become a man. There would be no Christmas; no “Name of Jesus” day. They would have been unnecessary. But mankind did not remain perfect. People broke God’s law and sinned. Not a few, some, or even most people sinned. All people - including you and me - have sinned. God’s Word declares, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23)

The reason we need saving is because sin has dire consequences. And it’s not the problems and woes of this life. As serious as they might be, they are only the symptoms of sin. We *might* be able to rescue ourselves from *some* of them. However, sin brings about two very serious consequences from which we cannot save ourselves: one, death, which we try to avoid at all costs and, two, hell, which we try to deny at all costs.

Jesus came to save us by doing what we were powerless to do -- fulfill the requirements of God’s Law - and by paying the price for sin which we were unable to pay -- sacrificing His innocent life to death and hell while on the cross. He has saved us from having to face God’s judgment on the Last Day. He has rescued us from the threat of eternal damnation in hell. The proof of this is in the empty tomb on Easter. By raising Jesus from death to life, God was sending a message to the world that all requirements had been met and every price had been paid. Jesus - whose name means “salvation” - had accomplished salvation.

The implications of this go even further. The name, Jesus, conveys assurance. In the book of Acts, we read the story about Peter and John healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus. When the Jewish Council attempts to silence them from speaking in the name of Jesus, Peter responded, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts. 4:12)

Jesus is the one and *only* name that brings salvation. Names such as Allah, Buddah, and so on have no power to save at all. Nor do the names of achievements and accomplishments - good works, moral life, religiosity, material possessions - have the power to save you from the coming judgment. Only Jesus.

To say such a thing in our world of diversity and multi-culturalism seems to imply insensitivity and arrogance. On the contrary, instead of conveying arrogance, the exclusivity of the name of Jesus in saving us conveys assurance. Imagine if you had to search out, learn, and compare every world religion and philosophy to answer the key question: what happens after death? It would be an impossible task that would leave you filled with doubt.

However, out of all the religious and philosophical systems constructed by men, you have found the one and only way of life: Jesus Christ. Or, rather, He found you and incorporated you into Himself through your baptism. Now, you don't have to search, to wonder, or to doubt the meaning and purpose of life. You have that purpose and know that meaning in Jesus Christ.

The name, Jesus, also conveys access. Access is not something we are used to having in the academic, business, or political world, especially if we are low on the totem pole in any of these fields. We are forced to deal with underlings, subordinates, and automated voice systems. Some have thought God operates in the same way and that it was therefore necessary to pray to the saints or the Virgin Mary so that they might pass on our concerns to God.

But Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) We are allowed, even encouraged, to bring our thoughts, our needs, our desires, our concerns, our fears directly to God, the Creator and King of the universe in the name of Jesus. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." (John 16:23).

This is not some sort of magical formula or the guarantee that selfish or irresponsible prayers will be granted. No, as children of our Heavenly Father, our will is constantly being reshaped and reformed to be more like His. When you say, "This I ask in Jesus' name", it is not merely an indicator that the prayer is over, but it is the guarantee that your prayer has indeed been heard by God Almighty and the assurance that those things which He has told you to pray for will be given to you.

Finally, the name, Jesus, conveys confidence. Sometimes, it is difficult to say "Happy New Year!" because our prospects as individuals, as a congregation, as a nation, and as a world seem so bleak. It seems that evil is in charge and getting stronger. We may feel that we are fools to continue in our Christian faith and our Christian ethics. It will all get swept away by the ever increasing, ever-surgng evil.

Nothing could be further from the truth. While evil may appear to be in charge now, it is not going to win the victory. St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:9-11).

On the final day, evil and those who perpetrate it will be compelled to kneel in defeat when the name of Jesus is mentioned. Those who have mocked Him, blasphemed Him, or simply ignored Him will be forced to confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord. Meanwhile, we will joyfully and willingly bow in worship, adoration, and praise at the name of Jesus as we begin to enjoy the final victory and eternal life.

This glorious assurance means that we can live confidently now, no matter how bad it gets and no matter how dark it seems. Satan and those who do evil around us may win a few battles, but victory in the war - the final salvation - belongs to the One whose name means salvation, Jesus Christ.

William Shakespeare once wrote, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet." Is that romantic poetry or practical reality? Does it really not matter what we call something or someone? If a name is simply a title that distinguishes one person or object from another, then perhaps Shakespeare's sentiments might be true. But for the One whom prophets foretold, the people longed and who was born in Bethlehem in the fullness of time, what He was called does matter. "He was called Jesus". The Lord saves! And He has saved us. He is saving us now. And He will save us for all eternity. Amen.