

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
The Feast Day of the Holy Name
January 1, 2017

Naming a child in any place or time is an important moment in the life of the individual, family unit, and the community gathered. It differentiates that child from another, it places them within a family context when named after a relative or when given the family surname, and it is an act which says "you belong". Each of us belongs to whomever named us. We also belong to God, whose claim upon our lives was affirmed in our baptism when we presented ourselves, or our parents presented us, by offering the name given to us by our family, unto God and unto this ritual, which joins us as brothers and sisters in Christ, into the family of God.

Mary, in Luke's gospel, and Joseph in Matthew's gospel, were each instructed by the angel Gabriel to name the baby "Jesus", which means "God saves", so we know Jesus' particular name mattered and that each gospel writer honors Mary and Joseph's obedience to the angel and to the Torah law which instructed this naming to occur at the Temple on the 8th day after his birth. Jesus entered into the covenant with the God of Israel through the circumcision and naming rituals.

Luke places particular importance on the naming of Jesus, mostly to remind his largely gentile audience that Jesus was Jewish and grew up nurtured in an observant Jewish household. The family would have studied the Torah at night, would have overheard the midrash (the dynamic and often argumentative conversations of the rabbis dissecting the scriptures for truth), would have observed the major feast days with pilgrimages to the Temple, and would have sat Shiva for seven days upon the death of someone dear to them.

It was also Luke's desire to set Jesus' birth within the roots of Judaism for the Jewish members of the community with whom he lived. He wanted the Jewish people to understand that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy which Isaiah and others foretold, so they could come together as a community and celebrate the arrival of the long-awaited messiah. Luke also wanted the Jewish people to embrace Jesus' role in the larger redemption history, to see Jesus' birth as an unfolding chapter in the long story of God saving God's people.

But the curious part is that Luke makes it very clear that one could be baptized into Christianity without first becoming Jewish in his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, in the story of Peter and Cornelius. So why then is it important to Luke that we acknowledge and embrace the Jewish Jesus?

Let's look at that question for a moment - why does it matter that Jesus was Jewish?

We can imagine that it mattered to Luke's audience and it matters to us that Jesus was Jewish because we believe he was, and is, the fulfillment of the ancient Israelite prophecy, not something that emerged separately, not just someone remarkable who offered teachings which

represented good values, or not someone who started a brand-new religion. This matters to us because if Jesus was the fulfillment of the ancient Israelite prophecy, then, as we are connected to Jesus, we are connected to the God of Israel.

And that connection to the God of Israel means we are connected to the God who was in the beginning, which is appropriately translated not as a specific moment in time, but as always and everywhere. If Jesus is the Messiah, then as Christians, we too are connected to the God of all time and the God who is everywhere. And being connected to the ever-present, ever-loving creator God makes a difference to our lives.

If Jesus were merely a person in history who taught us some good lessons about how to live, we could model that behavior and live a good life. However, if Jesus is the incarnate God of Israel, then by our connection to Jesus, we are the recipients of a love beyond imagination. And there's power in that transformational love that we are offered through the Holy Eucharist. This means we don't have to live a good and righteous life by our own strength and will power. We can tap into the source of love, provided by God through Christ, and be nourished for a life lived pleasing to God.

If Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Messiah, we also learn something very important about God. God keeps promises. God is faithful to humankind. God is trustworthy in the big matters, such as the larger story of humankind's salvation, and therefore God is trustworthy in the little matters, such as our own lives. This means that our lives are important to God and that God will faithfully and continuously be present to us. We make promises to God in our baptismal covenant and God keeps God's promises to us made in the covenant with the people of Israel. God will not turn away. This deeper covenant can offer comfort to us in our times of loneliness, distress, or despair. God will not give up on us.

If Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient Israelite prophecy of the Messiah and is therefore not just connected to, but is the incarnation of the God of Israel, then we realize something really exciting: Jesus is the new revelation of God, which means Jesus is a new way of seeing God, and through our connection with Jesus, we are brought into a new way of experiencing our salvation.

This is the paradigm shift that Jesus the incarnation offers us that the mere historical person of Jesus could not. With God's arrival into human history through Jesus' birth, there is a new manifestation of God, who stands with us, holds us and strengthens us, whose words, actions and suffering makes sense of our lives, and here's the key – who can transform our lives. If Jesus were not the fulfillment of the ancient Israelite prophecy, we could not be changed by him, his life, teachings, death, and resurrection, for it is God's love that changes us.

Because Jesus is the Messiah and is a revelation of the God of Israel, we can understand that God continues to be revealed to us, in the person of Jesus, but also through the sacrament Jesus left for us, as a way to be in communion with something that has been from the

beginning, always and everywhere. The power of love which is offered to us in communion with each other and with God, into which we are brought through our baptism and then sustained and nourished through the Holy Eucharist, is the power of love which created the world and brought us into relationship with something bigger and more wonderful than we can imagine.

Because God continues to be revealed through love, we can see salvation revealed before us, within us, and among us.

With Luke's emphasis on the naming of Jesus in the Jewish Temple, he solidifies Christianity's roots in the Jewish faith tradition, which opens up for us, the God, the always and everywhere God, who saves us. That makes a difference to us, because then we can see God's salvation all around us.

When I was in the Holy Land, or as it is called there, the land of the Holy One, I took many photos of images (painted, carved, or tiled) portraying people looking upon the face of Jesus, or seeing salvation. Some expressions were expected: ones of awe and complete amazement, ones of reverence and humility, others of pure delight. As you run through your favorite scripture stories in your mind, my sense is that you can imagine these expressions on the faces of the characters in the story: the pure delight of the leper who was healed, the awe and amazement of the shepherds in the field, the reverence and humility of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive nard. It is good to have those images locked in your mind and heart, for when you see those expressions of people around you, or when you yourself display them, you are being or seeing salvation. You are projecting into our world or receiving from others the love of Jesus, the one whose name means "God saves".

There is one expression I photographed which haunts me, mainly because it shows the seriousness of seeing or being Jesus in this world. It was in the church at Bethpage, where Jesus rode through on what we now call Palm Sunday, as he entered the city of Jerusalem. There's a gathering of women watching, one holding her son, who looks to be about 3 years old. Her eyes reveal an awareness of the radical nature of this moment that changes everything, a sense of awareness that from here on out, she is dedicated to this man who is passing by on a donkey to die in Jerusalem. She is giving her heart and life over to the God who saves, although God does not save this man before her, but all of humankind through his death and resurrection. There is almost a quiet joy and a steadfastness which becomes noticeable. In her expression, she reveals the depth of her commitment to enter into the holiness of the moment, through which she will live the rest of her life in faithfulness. I can't believe she's not on her knees, because I see this same expression in the eyes of many of you, as you come forward and kneel at the rail, and in receiving the body of Christ, you who know from here on out, your life will be changed and challenging, as you receive the love of Jesus, whose name means "God saves". This is what our response to salvation looks like.

For the last several years, I have found myself ending my extemporaneous prayers with the phrase, "and we pray all this is your Holy Name". Today is the Feast Day of the Holy Name so, this week, I have pondered on my usage of this phrase, which seems to have naturally

developed over the past few years. I don't know why my heart has chosen to say this as my "doxology", the praise and thanksgiving through which I offer my prayers. I don't see it in any other written prayers, so I'm not just taking other people's words.

I believe I am ending my prayers with, "We pray all this in your Holy Name", because the fact that Jesus saves is essential to my understanding of Jesus, and there is nothing that states this as clearly as Jesus' Holy Name, which ties Jesus to the God of always and everywhere, the God who saves us by God's love. I pray all my prayers "in the name of the God who saves, the God who offers our salvation in continual and creative ways of revelation, the God to whom we belong, the God who knows each one of us by name, Jesus Christ our Lord." Amen.