

## The Feast of the Holy Name

Jan 1, 2017

Luke 2:15-21

'a conversation with our grandsons'

**Diane:** Our homily is based on conversation with our grandsons Aidan (a senior at college) and Declan (a college freshman). We read aloud the scripture passages for the Feast of the Holy Name, and were surprised to find that the Gospel is the same reading (plus one additional line) as the reading for Christmas Eve. Dale and I let the boys carry the conversation where they wanted to go.

Aidan has been deeply involved in the life of the church, ever since he asked to be baptized at age five. His somewhat disgruntled first comment was that only the additional verse '*And he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb,*' seemed to have anything to do with *naming* Jesus. Then he began to wonder.

*Look at this, he said. The shepherds went out and told everyone what the angel had said to them. But, 'Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart' – she didn't tell anyone. And the shepherds didn't talk about what they had seen, but what had been told to them. What's that about?*

**Dale:** Declan, who proclaims no faith but sees straight into the heart of things, responded,

*there is a popular Christmas song, 'Mary did you know?' The scriptures never come back to what Mary knew – or didn't know. Maybe that's because she was clear that the Son's birth was a sign that pointed to God. Having been told she would bear God's Son, she might have expected something extraordinary about the baby's appearance, and something out of the ordinary for the birthplace. The commonness of the stable wasn't what I would have anticipated! The story of the birth reminds me of the Scripture on Thomas Sunday when Thomas insists on seeing the resurrected Christ's wounds for himself. The nativity story is sort of the opposite. 'Blessed are they who have not seen and come to believe.' So maybe, Mary already knew enough from God, and she didn't need anything more. I'm more like Thomas. Mary did you know?*

Diane: the lyrics are something like , Mary did you know your baby boy will one day walk on water? And so on.

**Dale:** The point is made so strongly in our Scripture, this is **God's** Son. Perhaps that's why it is important that *God* names Jesus.

He was almost certainly named Joshua. Jesus is a Greek translation of the popular Aramaic name Joshua, which means, 'the Lord saves'. Last year more than 3,500 babies born in the United States were named Jesus. It's a common name now, and it was a common name then. Think of all the names for the Messiah suggested in Isaiah: wonderful counselor, almighty king,

the everlasting father, the prince of peace. Why the name Jesus?

**Diane:** Well, said **Aidan:**

*well, just the act of naming is important. That's asserting ownership. And that the name is common, that emphasizes the full humanity of the baby, and at the same time is tied to the idea of God in everyone. Like Adam, which in Hebrew means 'man'; and Adamah, which in Hebrew means 'dust from the ground'. Adam, Adamah, the name for all mankind. In the Scriptures, Jesus calls himself the Son of Man – of Adam.*

**Dale:** brother **Declan** chimed in,

*so it's also about humility. A common name for common people. We are all in this life together. Except for the announcements of the angels, there is nothing unique about Jesus' birth. He wasn't a special child. He was one of several children, didn't he have a brother, James? I wonder when Jesus learned who he was?*

**Diane:** **Aidan** offered his own clarification.

*The whole point of the Christmas story is Jesus' humanity. He wasn't – as in the Greek mythology – a demi God or human with additional powers. We have to work through the paradox of Jesus being both man and God. The crucifixion was significant for the same reason, and, again, separates Jesus from Greek myth – the crucifixion would be meaningless if Jesus was born immortal. Jesus' humanity also means that to give himself for us was not an empty gift. It was at great cost.*

**Dale:** well, I agreed with that. **Declan** added,

*yes, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death" – that's the verse from Philippians. Whatever that means in your theology, the human death establishes Jesus' mortality.*

**Diane:** It might help to look at the Mosaic Law in Numbers and Leviticus to understand naming. According to the requirements of the Law, three ceremonies or rites are to follow the birth of a male child: circumcision on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3); dedication of the firstborn male (Num. 18:15) and purification of the mother (Lev. 12:2,4,6). According to Genesis, circumcision is a sign of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel. There was no rite of purification for the father.

The Gospel of Luke continues, (Luke 22-24) *when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord') and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord..*

So our Gospel today describes the naming of Jesus in the context of the Mosaic Law and according to the requirements of Mary's and Joseph's faith. It is the beginning of God's unfolding plan of salvation through their obedience to God. It's what could be called a collaborative eschatology : The new world promised by God through the incarnation – the

kingdom if you will – requires our participation.. Theologian Dominic Crossan said, God will not change us as individuals without our participation, and God will not change the world without our participation.

**Dale:** let's talk for a moment about the word 'savior'. In the first century, 'savior' did not yet mean what it means for Christians today. Many Christians connect 'savior' with atonement for sins, because for centuries Christians talked of Jesus saving us from our sins through his death on the cross. In Old Testament Scripture, the primary meaning of 'savior' is rescuer or deliverer.

**Diane:** What does it mean for a name to be holy? Is 'holy' another way of naming God? **Aidan** weighed in: *Names are important. There is power in a name. At birth it may have no resonance, but with life comes recognition. We can live up to our name, grow into it, or regret the name we are given.* Yes, I said, that in some ways is the short version of the Gospel story. There was the expectation of the people of a Messiah who would be king, all those names from Isaiah – but what Jesus lived into was the name "Savior.' Rescuer, deliverer.

**Dale:** we pray in the name of the Son, 'in Jesus name.' Why do we do that? **Declan** responded,

*when you know someone's name, you know some deeper truth about him, and when you use the name, others know who you are talking about. When you do something 'in the name of' you borrow their power, like the disciples were told to heal in the name of Jesus. Was that just magical thinking? I would say using the name conveyed Jesus' approval and blessing.*

**Diane:** at this point, **Kerry** (their Mom and our eldest daughter joined the conversation): *there is something else about naming. We use it to categorize others. Think of bullying: calling a kid 'fatso' gives the bully power over the child. Then there is the related idea of naming your fear – being able to name something, to call it out, makes it manageable . It's no longer unknown. Names can be used to stratify – do we use the first or the last name? which dignifies the person?*

**Aidan** offered his example, *yes, is it Professor Wiggins or Julia? I have one physics professor whom most students dislike – she is talked about among the students by her first name only. That's disturbing now that I think about it – it feels like she deserves it, so I can see it really is disrespect and intended to be.*

**Dale:** Using nicknames and first names indicate familiarity, which can be appropriate or indicate disrespect. In the case of your professor, use of the title conveys respect. When we use a distant title or formal name, we separate ourselves from that person.

Christ means 'the anointed one', but we've turned that into Jesus' last name, as in Jesus Christ. We should say, Jesus the Christ. Calling someone by name dignifies them, and also invites a relationship.

**Diane:** That says something about why we try to use name tags in our church: inviting a relationship. But think about the clerks in the grocery store who wear name tags, or the controversy among police officers whether they should be required to have name tags? There, the name is also about accountability.

Going back to the Feast of the Holy Name, putting all those ideas together. There is a wonderful verse in Psalm 8 – *‘what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?’* To me, that is the wonder of the Holy Name, Jesus the savior.

Amen.

January 1, 2017

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