

Sermon for Holy Name Sunday

Year A

January 1, 2017

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A father stood with his daughter admiring the artwork her Sunday School class had put up on the wall. Her piece was very well drawn, but a bit odd. The image was of a man leading a donkey, on which was a woman and her baby. Behind the donkey was a giant bug. He finally had to say, “Tell me about your picture.” “That’s Joseph and Mary and Jesus going to Egypt.” “Hmm. So why is there a bug in your picture?” “That’s the flea, Daddy.” He still looked a bit puzzled, so she continued, “You know. The angel came to Joseph and said, ‘Take the mother and child and flee to Egypt. That’s the flea!’”

As the new year turns we mark the passing of time. As St. Paul wrote, “Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away. Now, it looks as though they’re here to stay.” Not St. Paul of the New Testament, but St. Paul of Liverpool – who, by the way, was not a flea, but a Beetle.

Most pop songs about passing time are a bit wistful and nostalgic, looking back as if passing time is an enemy of the better life. Most biblical references to time, though, are forward looking, anticipating a positive completion of time in a perfect ending. The biblical vision for the world and for the passing of time is a vision of waiting for the ultimate renewal and redemption that God intends. The

best is yet to come, and we live in anticipation and waiting for that day.

Today is not only New Year’s Day, but it is also the eighth day after Christmas, the day of the Holy Name, when the bible teaches us that the child born to Mary would have been circumcised and given his name, Jesus. It is part of a string of stories about the infant child. Later this week we have epiphany, the story of the wise visitors from the East. And in a month, we have the story of the Presentation, when the parents take their child to Jerusalem to make the ritual offering of thanks and dedication in the Temple.

We draw two names into the story of the Holy Name. One is from the prophet Isaiah, who told of a child who would be named Emmanuel. One is from the angelic messages about this child to be born, who would be called Jesus. The names have meanings – they’re not just sounds. Emmanuel means God is with us. Jesus, or Yeshua, means God saves us. Both names were given at times of fear and oppression.

Isaiah spoke to a people watching their nation being taken apart by foreign powers, and the reminder of Emmanuel – God is with us – expanded imaginations and gave endurance a hopeful purpose. The birth of Jesus came into the midst of a time of oppression and

disruption, and the name “God saves us” was a rebuttal to the claim of Rome that it was the savior of the people.

In fact, most names have meanings. For example, my name – Randal – comes from the Germanic Randolph, which refers to the wolf who protects the edge of the city – the Rand Wolf. Malcolm comes from the Gaelic as a follower of Columba, one of the great Celtic saints of the church. Our deacon, Doe, has the given name Dorothy, which comes from the Greek meaning of God’s Gift. Peggy Lo is our lay assistant this morning, and Peggy is a derivative of Margaret, which carries the Greek meaning of a Pearl. But Peggy’s given name, Pei Han Lo, so far as I can render it without knowing the Chinese language, refers to a brave and courageous comet.

I have a friend who is a college football coach, who told the story of one of his players who went by the name Bum. It was, of course, a nickname, but my friend wondered if it wasn’t shaping this young man’s life in some odd ways. Bum was good enough to get by, but it seemed he had more talent and energy than he often showed. His grades were often on the edge, his appearance was often a bit shabby, and he didn’t seem to think that he mattered much. My friend had a long talk with him one day and asked what his real name was. Richard. The coach said he was going to start calling him

Richard, and he encouraged the young man to start going by that name himself.

It had an effect. Richard began to get better grades. He bought nicer clothes. He showed up on time. Years later he told my friend that he had never thought his name would matter, but that Bum had made him think he wasn’t worth much. My friend, he said, gave him back the name that made him feel important, worthwhile. Richard, by the way, means brave and powerful.

When I was in seminary I had a friend, an older woman who had been divorced for a couple of years. She had not been at peace with keeping her former husband’s name, and she didn’t feel good about taking back her father’s name, her maiden name. One day in the chapel as the communion service focused on the feast of Michael and all Angels it suddenly came to her. At the end of the service she declared to all of us – “I have a new name. From now on I am Barbara St. Michaels!”

Names have meanings, and names are important. We mark the Holy Name of Jesus today, but we also mark the holiness of your own names. Regard your name as sacred, for that is part of the beauty of our faith. One of the scandals of our faith is that it takes each person as important, each person in a personal and intimate relationship with God. Each of us is saved uniquely, and without a requirement to become something else. We are

saved as we are to be who we are. God knows you by name, loves you as you are. As Jesus taught, God knows the numbers of hairs on your head, you are so important to God. When the people of Israel, in a dark and hopeless time, wondered if God had forgotten. “God has left me,” the people cried. “My Master has forgotten I even exist.” And God replies, “Can a mother forget the infant at her breast, walk away from the baby she bore? But even if mothers forget, I’d never forget you—never. See, I’ve carved your names into the palms of my hands. I can never forget you.”

No matter where you are in your life, whether these are the best times for you or the darkest most oppressive days of your life, Jesus Christ is for you, God is with you. God has never forgotten you, any more than a mother could forget the baby at her breast. Your name is holy. Your life is a treasure. God is with you. God will save you.

May God bless this new year for you.