

January 1, 2017
Feast of the Holy Name
Philippians 2:5-11/Luke 2:15-21
The Rev. Carenda Baker

Do you know the story of how your given name was chosen? Some of us were intentionally named after a specific person one of our parents admired, loved, or wanted to remember. Some of our names were chosen because they were pleasant sounding and appealed to our parents. For some of the older folks among us, we might have been named rather indirectly, say especially if our parents expected a specific gender child, say the baby was hoped to be a girl who would be named Stephanie, but the baby turned out to be a boy and so he was named Stephen. Others of us had parents who took the opportunity to be creative and innovative, and for their newborn came up with a name that is “different”, unique, even uncommon.

January 1st has long been celebrated as the feast day we call the Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. In ancient Jewish tradition, a child was circumcised and named on the eighth day of life. This ritual was – and is – considered a sign of the covenant between God and God’s people, dating back to the time of the patriarch Abraham, about 1800 years before Jesus.

In biblical thought a name is not a mere label of identification. It is an expression of the essential nature of its bearer. In the Hebrew Scriptures the name is the essence of personality, the expression of one’s innermost being. For example, one of the Hebrew patriarch Isaac’s twin sons was named Jacob. The name “Jacob” means “heel grabber; supplanter, one who takes over by deceit”. And indeed, Jacob did trick his older twin brother Esau and their father Isaac out of the blessing that rightly belonged to Esau as the firstborn. Jacob, on the run from Esau who is furious with him, spends a night of struggling with an angel, and then is given a new name by God, the name “Israel”, which means “to wrestle with God, to cling closely to God.” Jacob is the patriarch who fathered 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. And in another story from the Hebrew Scriptures, we hear of a woman named Ruth who refuses to be separated from her mother-in-law Naomi after both their husbands have died. The name Ruth can mean “friend or companion” and also “to refresh”. Indeed, Ruth helped both of them make a new life for themselves in a foreign land.

The name for Mary and Joseph’s newborn son was chosen by God. Both the gospel writers Matthew and Luke recount that the name to be given to the baby was told to Mary and Joseph by the angels who appeared to each of them before the baby was

born. The child was to be called Jesus, which is Greek for the Hebrew name Joshua, which means “God saves” or “God is salvation”.

The coming of this child God’s Son into the world showed that God believed the world was worth saving, and that this was God’s intention.

Jesus. “*God saves*”. This is the one whom the disciples proclaimed had lived, died, and been raised from the dead. Jesus, this Savior, was the one in whose name and with whose authority they preached, healed, cast out evil spirits, and baptized new believers. Jesus is the one who taught them how to move closer to divine goodness, grace, and mercy. Jesus gave them hope that there was another way besides violence to face forces that oppose God. Jesus helped them see differently, to see God’s larger purpose beyond themselves.

So if Jesus’ name means “*God saves*”, and we call Jesus our Savior, what have we been saved from? Isolation. Meaninglessness and despair. Sin. Addictions. Self-centeredness. All manner of fears - of pain, of death; of being forgotten; of being judged “not good enough”; of physical and mental decline. Everything and anything we think could separate us from God and each other.

Here at the beginning of a fresh new calendar year, is a good time to think about what we have been saved for. In one of the churches I once served there was a dear older saint by the name of Paul Harbst. He said to me during a visit at his home on one occasion, “I believe we were put on this earth to learn how to love.” I agree with Paul. We have been saved to learn better how to love. Saved to become bearers of the love, light, sustaining and healing touch of our Lord Jesus, God in the flesh.

It’s pretty difficult to pass on love if we are uncertain whether or not we have ever experienced God’s unconditional love. So I would like to invite us to experiment together with a meditative prayer practice for the next month.

Take a bit of quiet time, alone, to read aloud and sit with these few **Scripture verses from Isaiah, two to four times a week through the month of January. The places in the passage where a blank appears fill in the blank with your own name.

Don’t rush through this time. You may find yourself wanting to stop and meditate on one particular word, phrase, or line. Trust that this is God’s Spirit speaking to you and just rest there. You may be drawn to read the entire passage several times, listening to your own name spoken, to let its reality sink deeper into your heart. That is good, too.

Each of us is a beloved daughter or son of God. The first day of a new year is a good time to be reminded of that truth. Let's begin this new year focused on God's holding us, undergirding us in love. The more we can rest in that love, the greater will be our desire to pass that love on to others, which is our part to play in continuing the saving work of God, which has been fleshed out for all to see in our Lord Jesus. Amen.

**** Isaiah 43:1-4, 49:15-16**

Thus says the Lord,

the one who created you, O [Israel]_____.

the one who formed you, O [Jacob]_____.

Fear not for I have redeemed you:

I have called you by name _____

and you are mine.

When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you.

and the rivers shall not overwhelm you.

When you walk through the fire,

you shall not be burned

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord, your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . .

You are precious in my sight _____

and honored, and I love you . . .

Can a woman forget her nursing child

and show no compassion

for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget,

yet I will not forget you.

See, I have inscribed you _____

on the palms of my hands.