

NAME THIS CHILD
The Holy Name of Jesus
New Year's Day, 2012

(Hymn #435 *At the Name of Jesus* (verses 1-4) as Sermon Hymn)

Today is the Feast day of the *Holy Name of Jesus*, always celebrated on January 1, 8 days after Jesus' birth, the day when he would have been circumcised and officially named. So, today we still see the baby Jesus lying in a manger, where he has been since Christmas day. The church is still decorated for Christmas. The wise men following the star are on their way to the place of Jesus' birth. The wise men for our crèche are getting close. Do you see them under the pulpit and in front of the baptismal font? This Friday, January 6 they will arrive at the cradle and worship the poor child born to be the King of Israel, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But then between Friday and Sunday we take a giant liturgical leap. We jump from the manger scene to 30 years later with Jesus now an adult stepping into the Jordan river to be baptized by John his cousin. The manger with the newly arrived wise men will be placed over in the children's chapel. By next Sunday we will recognize Jesus all grown up. He will be stepping out of the small stage where he lived for 30 years – the son of Mary and Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth – and stepping onto a new stage as the anointed one of God, the long awaited Messiah, the Christ. From the point of his baptism Jesus began his public ministry as the Messiah, God's Son.

Those 30 years seems like an enormous liturgical leap, but maybe not so big a leap as we may think. The bridge over that chasm between Jesus the little baby in a manger and Jesus being lifted out of the Jordan River with flowing from his beard and hair, (the bridge over that chasm) is the act of naming.

Today we celebrate Jesus receiving his name. *Jesus* is the name the angel Gabriel announced in two different appearances both to Mary and Joseph. *Jesus* (which is Greek) or the Hebrew version by which he was probably known to his contemporaries – Joshua – was not an uncommon name. Many Jewish children were named Joshua. Just as many children in Spanish speaking cultures today are named *Jesus*. But in this case the meaning of the name literally fits the person. *Jesus* means *God will save*. And this little baby boy, named *Jesus* on the 8th day after his birth, is the one who will save all God's people. The angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying

'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:20-21)

The Angel also gave Jesus a 2nd name, *Emmanuel*, which means *God is with us*. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in the Annunciation and proclaimed that God would conceive a child in her womb, he told her also that she should name her son, *Jesus*. But here again Gabriel gave the babe to be born in her a 2nd name: *He will be called the Son*

of God (Lk 1:32). So, the baby Jesus, who is also *God with us* and the *Son of God* will be the one to save and redeem God's people. *Jesus* will indeed be the one to fulfill that great name.

Okay, we know it is *Holy Name* day and that Jesus received his name on this day. Why isn't it a giant leap to go from the creche to his baptism? The answer to that question is in our own baptisms. One of the key things that is said by the priest to the parents and godparents after the prayer of consecration and the baby has just been handed to him or her is, "*name this child.*" In 32 years of baptisms no parents has submitted a new name at that point, but they could. This is why Baptism is called a *christening* a naming with a Christian name. When we name the child (or a child of God of any age) at that point we give him or her a new identity. From now on this child belongs to God, is part of the family of God, is *beloved* of God, is adopted as God's own son or daughter, is sealed by the Holy Spirit with the sign of the cross of Christ on the forehead and thus marked as Christ's own forever!

In the receiving of names and identities the naming of Jesus and the reception of our own names given back to us in baptism filled with new meaning and identity, is the bridge that connects us across those 30 years from Jesus' birth to his baptism and from those biblical times to our own times.

In our baptisms the very meaning of Jesus' name is also fulfilled in us. Our baptisms symbolically represent the reception of the gift of that holy name, that Jesus would save and redeem God's people. Through the gifts we celebrate in our baptisms – of being claimed as God's own, of having our sins forgiven and washed clean, of dying with Christ on the cross and rising with him in his resurrection to new life, of being part of Christ's great family the Holy Church of God and in the promise of new and eternal life – our baptisms represent salvation. In our baptisms the magnificent gift of the holy name given to Jesus at his circumcision is infused into our name, our identity, our broken lives, making us new and whole again.

All this is simply and beautifully illustrated for our children in the Godly play lesson on Holy Baptism. At the conclusion of a simple retelling of what happens in baptism a candle is lit from the Christ candle and the baptismal phrase stated, *name this child*. The child is named, and the lit candle handed to him or her with the words, *remember the day of your baptism*. The storyteller goes on to each child in the circle saying *name this child*, lighting a candle, saying their name, handing them the candle and saying *remember the day of your baptism*. We're going to reenact that now with each of you. (With deacon and assisting priest light and give out candles to each person in worship.) We'll keep our candles lit through the conclusion of this sermon and also through our proclamation of faith in the Nicene Creed, then we'll extinguish them.

Do you see how the light from the Christ candle at the center of the Advent wreath has grown bigger and bigger, without the light of Christ itself growing any smaller. I wonder how so much light can come from one light?

I wonder how closely the holy name of Jesus and our own names are connected as we receive this light? I wonder as we receive anew this light and our own names are renewed by remembering our baptisms, how this light can help us see the way more clearly? I wonder as we begin this New Year how we can shine more brightly with the light of Jesus Christ?