

Feast of the Holy Name

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[0:00] For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,! That according to the riches of His glory, He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being,! So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. You may be seated.

So on this, the official first feast day of 2017, I know this isn't the first feast day of the Christians, year, but it's the first feast of 2017. Father Evans asked a former Baptist to preach, which is interesting.

It's very interesting for me to find myself now within what we know as the Christian traditional year. And I thought that in today's sermon, when we also consider the circumcision and naming of Jesus, which were traditions designed to honor God and obey the scripture, that it would be appropriate to consider the value of Christian tradition.

I'm not here to bring a new view on tradition. I think that lately we've had enough problems with people bringing new views on tradition.

But I hope maybe I can provide a fresh view on tradition as somebody that is new to the Anglican way. I'm deeply moved by our family's first time through the Christian year, which just concluded this past year when Advent started.

[2:18] The idea that we arrange our personal and corporate lives around the gospel recognizes the prominent place that this proclamation of Jesus' victory holds over all areas of our lives.

And it has radically changed our family's life for the better. We have walked closer with Jesus in 2016 as we ever have when we did it with you here at Trinity through Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Within the Bible, Peter calls Christian peculiar people. It means we're strange.

We're different. We stick out from the world around us. Our traditions play a role in separating us from the outside world.

In a modernized world, in the middle of so much change, there is zero room for tradition. And we see this every time we turn on the news.

[3:29] We see corporations pushing against every tradition that we have in society in an attempt to monetize it. Tradition is slow.

Tradition is inefficient. Consider our text today. The fact that Mary took eight days to name Jesus. Can you imagine the system in the hospital putting up with that?

For the last birth we had in our family, Shoshanna, she was born right before Labor Day.

She's August 31st. And it was like right before the holiday weekend. And we didn't have her middle name selected when we gave birth to her.

We weren't sure. She ended up being named after my wife. Her middle name is Corleen. We weren't sure if we wanted to go that way or another way. And we had the lady from the, I think it's the social security office, right?

[4:32] Just multiple times during the day popping in trying to get us to make a decision. Finally, finally, we just said, all right, it's going to be Corleen.

And we made the decision. She wasn't putting up with us saying, we're going to name it eight days later. Tradition is good. It makes us slow down.

It makes us focus on what makes life meaningful. It is not efficient by today's standards, but it is profound. Mary and Joseph followed tradition because they desired to honor God.

And I think that we hear the nativity story so many times. It's one of the passages of scripture that we visit most.

That we take for granted Joseph and Mary's obedience. Is it possible that when we consider God's sovereignty over history and the numerous prophecies fulfilled through the manner in which Jesus was born and raised, that sometimes we forget the courage taken by Jesus' parents in raising him in a way that sought to please God?

[5 : 49] We look back at the Gospels and assume that the way Jesus was raised was just a societal norm. The reality is that the concept of a nation or community of Jews built around Jerusalem was about to be wiped from the face of the earth, not to show up again for another millennium.

In AD 70, Judea is wiped off the face of the earth, and it's not until 1948 that the Jewish state is reinstated. When Rome destroyed Israel, the temple was dismantled. And when the temple was dismantled, all those pieces that were in place for Jesus to fulfill law were removed. We see here in the next section in Luke that Jesus will be presented at the temple after his circumcision, much as was the case since the time of Moses through the law for a firstborn male, born eight days after his birth.

My point is this. Mary and Joseph's decision to have Jesus circumcised and present him in the temple was a counter-cultural move.

They took a stand of obedience to obey the law. Their obedience to have him circumcised on the eighth day after his birth points back to Moses' law.

[7 : 23] So do you understand what this means? It means that their obedience places him in the covenant community. He is in the line of Abraham.

He is the root of Jesse, the son of David. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Today we usually approach this issue from a reverse manner because we're looking back at it from 2017.

I got the year right. I usually mess that up. And because circumcision came before baptism, but Scripture tells us that baptism and circumcision coincide.

Joseph and Mary's choice to circumcise Jesus in the closing of the Old Testament age is exactly like what we do today when we baptize a child into the church.

It concentrates or sets aside the child to participate in a called-out group whose purpose is to serve God. Had Joseph and Mary failed to be obedient to God's law, Jesus could not have been the Messiah.

[8 : 35] So while his circumcision points to the fulfillment of the ancient promises, Jesus' name points to a fulfillment that was a new revelation.

It's not that he nullifies the Old Covenant. I think Matthew 5 is pretty clear that Jesus fulfills the law at every point down to its smallest part. But the author of Hebrews opens his letter saying that God spoke to us in many different ways to the Old Testament fathers, but he makes his complete revelation in Jesus.

After speaking of the Old Testament worship as a shadow of heavenly things, the author of Hebrews writes of Jesus, Jesus' holy name announces that better promise.

Let me explain. A name is meant to announce the purpose and character of the person or thing it is assigned to. And I don't think that in today's modern society, we place as much importance on a name as they did during the time of Christ.

For instance, we're very quick to name things. Every time you turn on the news or go on to a website like CNN, there's a new name for some fad that somebody's cranked out because they haven't cranked out a name for something in the last two hours.

[10 : 24] So we have all these bizarre hyphenations, combinations, things like Brangelina, and things that I don't even understand because we don't stop and think through it.

But the reality is there is a degree to which we still recognize in today's society the power that a name has. Let me give you an example.

We'll play a little guessing game. I'm going to give you statistics on a name that I pulled from a compilation of federal birth records.

There's one name. Let's see if you can figure out what it is. The highest popularity ranking it's ever had is number 599 in America.

Nonetheless, the name was given to the greatest number of children in 1918 with 56 occurrences. During the years 1909 through 1916, 1925 through 1928, this name took a definitive turn upwards in popularity.

[11:32] Whereas, here's the big hint, clearly downward trends happened around 1930 to 1933. This was one of the, no, I'm not going to say, this was the most famous name of the 20th century, but only five children in the United States were given this name in 2015.

Can you guess what this name is? Adolf. There's a reason that as a society, we don't name our children Adolf.

We understand that a name has power. And I apologize if there is anybody here that has a relative named Adolf. I'm not calling him evil. I just want to be clear. You know one of the few in the United States.

But we don't name our children Adolf because we know that a name is power. All through history, we have understood this reality.

God gives the first created human the name the man or Adam.

[12:54] And the man's first act of dominion is naming the animals. Isaac's second born twin is named Jacob, meaning supplanter.

And we all know how that worked out for the first born Esau. Hannah names her first born son who she consecrated to God Samuel or name of God and he becomes judge and prophet of the Lord.

In one of my favorite Bible namings, God tells Isaiah to name his son Meir Shalal Hashbaz, meaning hurry to the plunder in order to communicate the disastrous future of Damascus and Samaria.

I could go on and on and on. As a matter of fact, almost every single character we see in the Bible has a character and purpose that can be summed up in his or her name.

But today, let's limit our consideration to the two namings we find in the first two chapters of Luke. In both cases, the idea for the name came from God, from a holy messenger, Gabriel, an angel.

[14:18] In one case, the parent resists the name and God overrides the rebellion. In the second instance, Mary is obedient after being encouraged by the testimony of the shepherds. In Luke, in the first chapter, verse 13, we find the angel Gabriel announcing the birth of John to John's father, Zachariah, while he was serving in the temple.

Imagine seeing an angel appear within a worship service amongst bellows of incense. I think that you would listen and pay attention to his message.

Gabriel announced that John's birth would bring joy to many. And John's name means God has been gracious.

His birth was a sign that the long-awaited Savior was about to come and dwell with man. His name was a proclamation of that truth. It was a whole sermon in a single word.

As Zachariah exclaims in his song of praise, the sunrise shall visit from on high. Yet, Zachariah didn't believe the revealed truth yet about John during Elizabeth's pregnancy.

[15:40] He had to be convinced. God works this way sometimes. He reveals this truth to us and we resist it, but he doesn't let go. He works on our life overpowering our resistance until we comply with his plans.

Zachariah was struck dumb. And I was thinking about this actually last night. I was trying to go to sleep about what significance that would have. And then I got thinking, Father Evans would probably agree, it's probably pretty hard to practice your vocation as a priest if you can't utter anything and make any kind of vocal proclamation.

This really hit Zachariah right where it hurts. I guess I've never thought about that before, how devastating it was. His way of life, his way of making a living, his vocation was taken away from him as he thought about the command left by the angel.

Now I want to look at the role the naming of the baby played in this. If you look in verses 57 through 64 of Luke chapter 1, we find here that the expected name for John was Zachariah Jr.

It was what all the relatives that gathered expected. There's a problem here though. John's ministry was not going to be like his father's. John would not serve the old covenant in a temple.

[17:16] He would serve out in the wilderness calling for repentance and preparing the way of Jesus. Radically different from what Zachariah did. Elizabeth was a woman of faith and appears to have been on the same page with God through the whole process.

I think a lot of times marriages work that way. Sometimes, I know it was my case that I turned from the Lord during my late teens, early 20s and it was, like Peter would say, it was righteousness of my wife that had the effect until my heart came around.

Her faith is demonstrated when she is the first to announce that the baby will be named John. And the crowd of relatives can't accept it. which I'd like to make a sidebar and note, for any parents out there, it is not unique to have other extended family members that think they know what the best way is to raise your child.

If you have a mother or mother-in-law or aunts that tend to meddle in the affairs of your household, this isn't a unique thing to 2017.

This has been going on since the dawn of time. So they decide to do what the, you know, what they, they bring Elizabeth to Zechariah so that he can straighten her out.

[18:47] The Lord has worked on his heart. Zechariah comes around and confirms in writing, his name will be John. Mary's faith is more forthcoming when Gabriel comes to her.

she says this, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word. While Mary and Joseph's naming of Jesus was an act of obedience based on the angel's revelation, God does not leave them alone to struggle with their calling.

The shepherd's visitation confirms and encourages Mary's heart. We see that in the reading today that she stores them in her heart and ponders them.

She meditates upon the truth of what the angel has told her. I don't want us to miss what is happening here.

What is Gabriel's message? Your son will be called the son of the most high and of his kingdom there will be no end. It is the gospel.

[20:04] What is the message that the shepherds bring Mary? Peace with those whom God has pleased. It is the gospel. What is the message of Jesus' name?

It is the gospel. It literally means God saves. Mary understands and expresses the full meaning of his name when in the Magnificat she declares that Jesus will save his people from their sin.

You see, Mary needed the gospel preached to her over and over again. Zachariah needed the gospel preached to him over and over again.

We need the gospel preached to us over and over again. Mary didn't simply obey the angel's command with her mind.

She meditated on it, digested it, prayed about it, sang about it, arranged her marriage around it, and changed her living location around it.

[21:19] And she declared it to the world when in obedience she gave her son the most holy name, the name above all their names, Jesus. And that is the name which will be praised for all time.

The name of Jesus is a name of power. In the same way it ruled over the life of a first century Judean teenage girl, it rules over our lives.

It rules over this nation, it rules over this planet, and it rules over all created reality. As we saw in Kay's second reading, all of history will be summed up in one final moment when every knee will fall before the name of Jesus in worship.

And in that we recognize that the name of Jesus is the name of ultimate power. The name above all names, the name of Jesus is a prayer that his people cry out in the time of their deepest trouble, Jesus, God save us.

Because of this we understand the holy name of Jesus should not be taken lightly. And it's very easy for us as Christian parents to chide our children from the commandments and say, thou shalt not take the name of thy Lord in vain, which is good and what parents should be doing.

[22:52] But that's not enough. We certainly should not use the name of Jesus as a casual curse word, but we should be very careful about any use of Jesus' name that is not done in faith.

In my shorter lifetime, I have seen an increasing use of Jesus' name by churches who want to use it to justify evil. As just one example, many have tried to legitimize homosexual perversion by saying it is okay if done in Jesus' name.

Let me be very clear. Any use of Jesus' name, not done in faith and worship, will be judged by fire. We pray in Jesus' name, heal in Jesus' name, baptize in Jesus' name, confirm in Jesus' name, exercise in Jesus' name, sing in Jesus' name, worship in Jesus' name, but we must never, ever use Jesus' name in a way that leads people to be in bondage to sin and in danger of hell.

The name of Jesus is a proclamation of victory and liberty, not bondage. He came to set his people free and rule for eternity and his name is the announcement we have of that.

And to that end, let me point out that as Anglicans, we don't limit the celebrations we have today on the Feast of the Holy Name to once a year. The Anglican Way worships the Holy Name of Jesus every day.

[24 : 35] Our Book of Common Prayer arranges our daily life and weekly worship around Jesus. It is a tradition that sets us apart from the world that is around us.

I'd like you to take your Book of Common Prayer and like to close today's reading by reading together one of our canticles found on page 93, The Song of Simeon.

Simeon's an interesting character. If we were to continue a little further in our Gospel reading, we would have seen Simeon right there in the temple as Jesus presented. Simeon is one of the first believers in history to hear the name of Jesus.

And what we have here is his response of praise and worship to hearing that name. Let us read this together, finish with the Gloria.

Gloria. Think about the name of Jesus and listen to what the Spirit is saying to us now. Lord, you now have set your servant free to go in peace as you have promised.

[25 : 55] For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see. light to enlighten nations in the glory of your people as Israel.

Glory to the Father, to the Son, to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.

Amen.