

The Feast of the Holy Name, being the Eighth Day of Christmas, 1 January 2023  
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR  
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the name of Jesus, source of all life and love, our way to the heart of God. This sermon has more scholarly content than usual, but at its core is all about our relationship with God, so I hope you will stick with me on the journey.

Today's Numbers reading contains the High priestly blessing which has the Holy Name of God 4 times. Originally this was the name given to Moses at the Burning Bush and was said out loud when the texts were recited or read. It was considered a great gift to know God by name but over the centuries fence was built around the commandment to 'not take the name of the Lord in vain' (which is intended to forbid misusing this intimate knowledge of God to harm others, by calling down curses on them). The idea of 'building a fence' around any law is that the safest path to a virtuous life is to avoid getting anywhere close to disobeying a law. So in this case the way to avoid misusing God's Holy Name was by never saying it at all. So everywhere the sacred text includes the Holy Name (which is used a lot in the Hebrew Bible) any Jewish person would know to substitute the word 'the Lord' (in Hebrew 'Adonai'.)

For centuries Hebrew was written with only consonants, so that the reader was expected to know which vowel sounds to supply. So, for example, if an English reader saw, 'cp' she would know by context whether that meant 'cap' or 'cup' or 'cape' or 'cop' or 'cope'. The inclusion of pointing, or writing vowel symbols with the consonants, came well after the name of God ceased to be spoken. So we do not have the original vowels. One current scholarly guess is that the Name represents God as the breath of life so that the four consonants traditionally called the Tetragrammaton – in our alphabet YHWH – was probably pronounced something like Yahweh: an inbreath followed by an outbreath. But by the time the scriptures were translated into other languages this had not been said out loud for centuries and any Jew would know to say 'Adonai' when they saw YHWH, so that the scribe would put the vowels of Adonai onto the original YHWH representation of the holy but unspeakable Name.

How we tell in English whether the original Hebrew is actually 'Adonai' or 'Yahweh', is that 'Adonai' is translated 'the Lord' written normally with just one capital letter and 'Yahweh' is written with all caps, indicating the name which is not to be pronounced. You can clearly see the two forms in today's Psalm. Every time we see this all caps form it is a reminder that we have been given the gift of calling God by name and of knowing the loving purposes of God for the whole world. It is a blessing.

So when God takes on human flesh and comes to us in the most accessible intimate way possible, as a baby, God gives a new name, a reminder of the intimate relationship that God seeks with us. Call him 'Jesus' 'Yeshua' which means 'God saves'. We understand it as a renewal of the promise to be accessible, that favorite angelic reassurance that we should 'not be afraid'..

Just like any other Jewish male child before and since, on his eighth day of life, the first day of his second week, this remarkable baby born among the animals and sleeping in a feeding trough, is circumcised, as a symbol of his inclusion in the sacred covenant between God and the people of Israel, and named by his father. Joseph faithfully gives him the name that the Angel told him to, Yeshua to the speakers of Hebrew and Aramaic, Ἰησοῦς to the Greek speakers, *Jesus* to the Spanish speakers, Jesus to us. 'God saves' to all of us.

In the ecstatic reading from Philippians, Paul reminds us that the incarnation is a renewal and extension of the generous approach of God to be in relationship with humanity. He emphasizes the extreme humility of divinity choosing to accept the limitations of human life, including death at the hands of human power-seekers. So that the name we are given to use is a name more holy than any other because it represents that extreme divine generosity.

The idea that calling God by name is a privilege and a gift not to be taken lightly carries through all three Abrahamic traditions. In Islam, Allah is the Arabic word ‘God’, but God is said to have 99 names given in the Holy Qur’an. These are 99 attributes, such as ‘the Beneficent’ and ‘the Merciful’, all holy ways humans have been given to speak to God, to talk about God, to understand God.

One lovely Islamic tradition says that God in fact has 100 names, but that humans have only been given 99 of them. Only the camel knows the 100<sup>th</sup> name, which is said to be why camels always appear so proud and pleased with themselves. When they are quietly gazing off into the distance blinking their beautiful long eyelashes, seeming to contemplate something we cannot see, it is said that they are contemplating the beautiful 100<sup>th</sup> name of God. I love that idea.

All of the names of God, the ways we have to address the divinity at the heart of all things, are paths to relationship, invitations to open our hearts to the One who created and sustains all things. So, the Feast of the Holy Name reminds us of this invitation to relationship, to humility, to remembering that this great opening to relationship which happens definitively in the incarnation happens within the context of the existing relationship of God with the Chosen People, the nation of Israel. The new name is given in the context of the same ritual that gives a name to every Jewish boy. And reminds us that God always comes to us in love, to heal and help and save, at once vulnerable and needing our care – and the power above all things.

Through most of the Christian tradition we have regarded the incarnation as showing that because God has taken human, physical form, we can encounter God through physical representations, like statues and paintings – and especially icons, which are meant to be windows into the divine realm. Islam has generally followed the caution of the Hebrew tradition in prohibiting images of God or even any animate being, another fence around the Law, protecting us from idolatry, from worshiping a thing instead of the God the thing is meant to represent. One of the great fruits of this caution is the development of extraordinary, especially Arabic, calligraphy, inspiring art made of the beautiful words of scripture. Buildings are decorated with flowing, elegant, and inspiring swirls and angles, all words about God and names of God, to draw the hearts of the faithful into relationship.

On the feast of the Holy Name, the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, we can continue to look at our crèches and our Christmas cards, at all the lovely images showing us the miracle of the divine birth, and we can contemplate the Holy Name, the name above all names, the name which gives us direct access to God, and perhaps ourselves make a lovely picture out of the letters of the Holy Name of Jesus as a meditative exercise.

Today is indeed the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, the Feast of the Holy Name, in our church Calendar, but in the secular calendar that commands most of our lives it is of course New Year’s Day, the day of the Rose Parade and football and of new beginnings.

As a handout at the end I have a wonderful New Year’s poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, which for me expresses the hopes so many of us share for a new year full of joy and life, with goodness and love overcoming the strife characterizing the poet’s time and ours.

The Holy Name, like all to do with Christmas, is a gift of hope, hope which gives us confidence and courage to engage the evil and discord in our world - and to be bringers of blessing, because of the promise and love brought to us in Jesus.

In his end of year message, Dean Randy Hollerith of our National Cathedral writes, “People count on this Cathedral to stand for things that are good and healing and holy.” I hope that all around us will similarly continue to count on Saint Aidan’s “for things that are good and healing and holy.”

Let us pray. Gracious and Loving God, we thank you for the gift you have given us to approach you and to know you ‘fully even as we have been fully known’ by you. Grant that the gift of being able to know you will give us the courage to live as your hands and feet and voice in the troubled but beautiful world that you have given into our care. Amen.