

Feast of the Holy Name, Year B  
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

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One of the most important decisions  
that new parents must make  
is what to name their baby.  
It's something the child will carry throughout life,  
and it could profoundly shape the child's personality  
and life experiences,  
for good or for ill.

Many parents struggle with this momentous responsibility.  
If you google the phrase "What should I name my baby?"  
you'll come up with just over 8.5 million hits.

The Shutterfly website has a "Baby Name Generator" to help you.  
You type in your last name,  
then pick whether you're interested in a boy's name,  
a girl's name,  
or a neutral name.  
Then you indicate whether you'd like something  
Biblical, or popular or traditional,  
or maybe hipster or a celebrity name.  
Then click the button and you get a first and middle name  
that pairs nicely with your last name,  
along with an explanation of the meaning of those names.

Other websites have long lists  
of various ethnic names and their meanings.

You know what one of the most common complaints  
from expecting parents is,  
when they're trying to decide what to name their baby?  
Concern over what the grandparents  
or other family members  
will think.

Often, they get major pushback  
when they float potential names out loud  
before the little one's arrival.

They may find that grandparents' ideas  
about a good name  
sound just a tad old-fashioned  
to their millennial ears.  
And their ideas sound outrageous to the grandparents.  
Fortunately, a name that grandparents hated  
when it was just a hypothetical suggestion  
will be a name those same grandparents  
learn to love  
once it's attached to a real-live, cherubic little human.

You can't help but wonder if Mary and Joseph  
ever had a discussion with THEIR parents  
about what they would name little Jesus.  
In many ways, I suspect having the angel TELL them  
what to name him  
might have been a relief.  
With all the things Mary and Joseph had to worry about  
with that little guy,  
at least they didn't have to stress out  
about trying to choose a name.  
He came pre-named.

Today, we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus,  
the name God gave to his son.

In our gospel lesson for today,  
we hear that "after eight days had passed,  
it was time to circumcise the child;  
and he was called Jesus,  
the name given by the angel  
before he was conceived in the womb."

It was the custom in Jesus' day  
to name a male child at the time of circumcision,  
much as today

children are given their names at their baptism or christening.

Earlier in the Gospel of Luke,  
through the angel Gabriel,  
God tells Mary that she will conceive and bear a son  
and that she is to “call him Jesus.  
He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.”

In naming him Jesus,  
God is telling us something about who he is.  
The name “Jesus” is a Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua,”  
which means “the Lord helps” or “the Lord saves.”  
When we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus,  
we’re celebrating the one through whom  
and in whom  
the Lord helps or saves his people.

That’s an audacious name to give to a baby, isn’t it?  
It would be sort of like parents today  
naming a child “Champ” or “Einstein” or “Peyton.”  
We tend to overlook this since we know how this story ends.  
But even before his teaching and preaching,  
before his healings and miracles,  
before his death and resurrection,  
Jesus is already identified by God  
as the one through whom God will save his people.

An 8-day-old baby named Jesus.  
“He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High.”  
In the naming of a tiny child,  
we already catch a glimpse God’s audacious plan  
to save the world  
through the gift of a vulnerable little human being.

It may surprise many of us to learn  
that we have also been given an audacious name.  
The Catechism in older versions of the Book of Common Prayer  
used to begin with this question:  
“What is your Name?”  
After saying your name, you were then asked,

“Who gave you this Name?”

The answer to this question was to be the following:

“My Sponsors in Baptism;  
wherein I was made a member of Christ,  
the child of God,  
and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.”

Our names, given in baptism,  
tell us something important about who WE are.  
We ARE beloved children of God,  
members of Christ,  
and through him heirs of the promised kingdom.  
Yes, we are vulnerable human beings  
with ordinary names like Becky and Rose and Harry.  
But we have also been given names in baptism  
that identify us as extraordinary participants  
in the story of God’s love for the world.

Today we celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus.  
And this truly is the feast of every believer,  
because the name of Jesus becomes our name,  
and each and every one of us is called  
to the experience of salvation.  
Anointed and claimed by Christ in baptism,  
we become the Holy Name of Jesus.

On this day, when we celebrate the Holy Name,  
I think a short breathing-prayer exercise might be appropriate.  
Let me invite you now to close your eyes,  
and for the next minute,  
breathe in and breathe out  
using the names you use for Jesus.  
Some of them are on our bulletin cover,  
and you may have some you use yourself.  
Brother, Savior, Dear Lord,  
Christ, Master, Beloved, Holy One...

Imagine that the names you say as you breathe in  
seek to heal and bless you.  
Imagine that the names you breathe out

seek to heal and bless your family, your community, and the world.  
Breathe in and out.  
In and out, repeating the names you use for Jesus.

(pause for one minute)

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.