



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Holy Name Day

#### What's in a Name?

**[RCL]: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21**

In Act II of William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, the lovestruck Juliet ponders a difficult circumstance: she, a Capulet, has fallen in love with a man who bears the name of her family's sworn enemies—the name of Montague. Passionately and hopefully, with youthful optimism, she challenges the conventional wisdom that uniting her name with Romeo's is an impossibility:

*“What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,  
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part  
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!  
What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.”*

Anyone who has seen or read *Romeo & Juliet* knows, however, that Juliet's optimism is tragically unfounded; the names of Capulet and Montague and their attendant ill-will engulf the two lovers in their families' violent legacy. A rose, in this case, remains a rose, and it is a thorny, painful one.

Although we might not live in that same world of ancient grudges, we, too, would do well to consider the power of names and the ways in which they shape our destiny, especially on this day, the Feast of the Holy Name.

For the Church, on this fresh, first day of the calendar year, we are presented with the name of Jesus and asked to consider how it has shaped and continues to shape our own destiny as his followers and as his family. For whether we are Montague or Capulet or anything else, it is the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was the Christ, that indicates our fundamental identity as God's children.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that after his birth, Mary and Joseph had their newly-born child circumcised and that they bestowed on him the name given by the angel of the Lord at the Annunciation: *Jesus*, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means, “the Lord has saved.” This event has long been celebrated by the Church on the eighth day of the Christmas season, because, as reflected in the Gospel text and in Jewish tradition, circumcision and naming occurred eight days after birth.

And so, on this day, as we review our lists of new year's resolutions and ponder what 2020 might hold for each of our lives, we are also invited back into the life story of the infant Jesus. With his circumcision and naming, we are invited into Jesus' ritual incorporation into the history and hope of the Jewish people. We are invited to reexamine the ways that this particular name (and time, and place) will have a direct bearing on the nature of his salvific mission. And we are invited to pause and reconsider what a radical, surprising thing all of this is.

Because in the name *Jesus*, the God who transcends all identities took on a certain narrative and a certain social location, thus revealing an intimate concern with the particularities of our own narratives and social locations. In the name *Jesus*, God concentrated the fulness of divine love within the parameters of a single life, demonstrating that each of our single lives has the capacity to receive and pour out that love, too. Through our baptism, the name of Jesus becomes our name. His story becomes our story.

God has been working through names for a very long time. In Genesis, he names the various components of creation—the Night, the Day, the Sky, the Seas, the living creatures. And in the Book of Numbers, as we read today, God says to Moses that by blessing Israel, “They shall put *my name* on the Israelites.” The name of God is imprinted on God's people; their purpose and their future hinges on remembering the One for whom and by whom they are named. And through Christ, this adoption has extended to all who receive the name of Jesus.

We often speak of faith as being in relationship—with God and with one another. But bearing a name, it should be said, is not quite the same as participating in a relationship. It is deeper, more intractable, less subject to whims and fancies. Juliet might dismissively ask, “What's in a name?” but on some level, she knows—as we do—that our names and all they signify cannot be sloughed off so easily. In her case, this is a difficulty, but it can also be a blessing. For us, as Christians, it means that the name of Jesus is something so deeply a part of us that it cannot be negated by any particular decision we might make. We belong to him, and no past mistake, no failed resolution, no future error in judgment can erase that name from our lives. We are not “in a relationship” when we are given a name—we simply are that thing, that person. This is how closely we are known and held by God in Christ.

This is why Paul can say in his letter to the Galatians that “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” in such a manner that we are God's children, not servants subject to the variable temperament of a master. Through the name of Jesus, we have been incorporated into an inalienable bond between the Father and the Son. The Son dwells within us and relates to the Father through us. This is the gift and the responsibility that we carry through our lives.

Given all of this, it might be fruitful for us to consider how the name of Jesus—which is now our name, too—might shape how we desire to live in this new year. Do our hopes for the coming months include growing more fully into our identity as one named by God? What steps might we take to discover that

identity anew? What stumbling blocks have prevented us in the past from claiming the name of Jesus as our own?

Answering these questions is a key reason why we come together each week. This is the beauty of the Church and the communities we find within it: they are the places where we work out what it means to answer to the name of Jesus. We serve, and welcome, and challenge, and listen, and worship, and abide with one another. We look for traces of Jesus in each other's faces, and in the faces of the poor, and we pray that they might see him in us as well.

And we also remember that although this Holy Name bears our destiny—that this child circumcised and named today must grow, and learn, and suffer, and live, and die, and so we must along with him—nonetheless God is always doing something new. The story is only just beginning.

Romeo and Juliet could not escape the fate that their names implied, but in their death, a new peace between their families was born. The thorny rose was transfigured by their love.

Our story—that of the name of Jesus—inescapably leads to a cross, but it continues onward, too, into the joy of resurrection and the promise of eternal life that rests in the Holy Name of God. It is another story transfigured by love—the story that we tell, and the story that we live.

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