



## Holy Name Day

### The Semiotics of Jesus

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

We put a lot of weight on names. Think about the importance that is conveyed when we use our complete name, middles and hyphens and Jr.'s and all, in a vow or an oath. Or the exciting rush when a host at a restaurant calls your name—your table is ready! Or when you hear your name called in a meeting or classroom when you haven't been paying attention. When someone you love yells your name in desperation or frustration. When you hear your name from a huddled group and can only think the worst. When one assumes a new name after a transformation, like living into their true gender identity. A nickname—one that reminds of an inside joke, a good memory, or one that only one person, or a few, is allowed to use. Names carry power, emotion, and story.

Names are not identity itself, but rather they reflect identity. It's the closest a limited language can get to describing a person, an object, or a feeling; a word is used as a vessel for the messy, complex, and contradictory. Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the founders of semiotics, used the terms “signifier” and “signified” to describe a sign – the plane of *expression* (signifier) which describes the plane of *content* (signified). It is interesting to think of a name as a sign, one with a signifier (or expression) of a signified (or content).

Today we note not only the beginning of a new Gregorian calendar but the significance of the Holy Name of Christ. What happens when we apply the ideas of semiotics to this feast day, or to the Holy Name itself? Our collect of the day specifically identifies Jesus as a *sign* of our salvation. The signifier (Jesus) represents the signified (our salvation). The Holy Name we celebrate today isn't the 5 letters that make up the English-translated word of the name which we call Christ on Earth: Jesus, a name that tells its own story as an heir to the name of Joshua, or Yeshua. Instead, we celebrate what the name represents, the implications of Christ's birth and identity. And that's beyond anything our language, or any sign indeed, can truly grasp.

The name we use to describe the Holy One is a significant theme in many of our faith stories of origin. For example, in the story from Numbers, we find Moses and his community prepping for a journey. They've been camped out at Mt. Sinai (remember the 10 commandments and golden calf parts of the narrative) for about a year, and they're ready to travel – ready for the Promised Land! They know a lot of wilderness exists between Mt. Sinai and the Promised Land. In the very human move of institutionalizing faith, Aaron has just been consecrated high priest, and he and his sons serve as the “official” representatives of the

Lord. Meanwhile, Moses assumes the role of the “personal” representative of the Lord and receives a blessing to pass on to Aaron to pass on to the people.

Now, thousands of years of the game of telephone later, we receive the gift of this blessing for the Israelites through the passage in Numbers. It’s a common benediction today, for good reason: The blessing sets the tone for a faithful journey. This is a journey in which there will be struggles, frustration, and failed expectations, but God’s presence as well. In gifting the blessing to Moses, the Lord says, “So [Aaron and the priests] shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” The Name of the Lord is not just a name, not just a word, but a signifier of *blessing*. The Creator of the Universe, the Liberator of the Israelites, is with them through the wilderness—all through a name.

Continuously in our faith stories, the Name of the Lord is exalted – not because it’s a beautiful name (which name shall we choose?) - but because of what it represents. How can we possibly use language to signify God? How could we find one word to describe the creation and destruction, mighty liberation and gentle comfort, anger and grace that is the power of the God of the universe? We are restricted to using a name, or a handful of them. And whatever name we land on in a particular moment, the most suitable vessel for the concept, we exalt the Name. The psalmist, using the word translated here as “governor,” contemplates the nature of God, and repeats, “How exalted is your Name in all the world!” This passage from Psalm 8 tries in itself to use poetry, language, words, and names to describe both the majesty of the universe and the role of a Messiah, the son of man.

During Christmas and Advent, we use many names to describe the son of man, Christ himself, some of which harken back to Isaiah’s prophecy: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And in the Gospel passage today, we get a glimpse of the naming ceremony for the infant Jesus. Remember, the angel has named Jesus since even before conception, at the Annunciation. And today, 8 days after his birth, the community is celebrating Jesus’ bris, or *brit milah*, a naming ceremony which includes the circumcision of the male infant. Luke is adamant about reminding us that Jesus was not “Christian” in the way we now use the term but decidedly Jewish, and his family is observing the Torah rituals.

As part of the naming ceremony, the male child is marked with circumcision, a ritual that signifies unity with God and acceptance into the community of the chosen people. The circumcision of Jesus and the inclusion of it in the Gospel of Luke both establish for the reader his Jewishness and teach us about the nature of Christ. Jesus was completely divine, and so didn’t need any ritual to bring him into unity with God. *And* Jesus was completely human and participated in human experiences. Jesus didn’t *need* to be circumcised, didn’t *need* to be hungry or thirsty or tempted or ridiculed. Jesus didn’t *need* to die. But he did. Matthew Henry’s Bible Commentary, written in the 1700s, says that Jesus’ circumcision “was, in his case, a pledge of his future perfect obedience to the whole law, in the midst of sufferings and temptations, even unto death for us.”

When we invoke the name of Jesus, this is the concept that cannot be embodied by language alone: that Jesus is one and the same with the Creator of the Universe, there since the beginning, *and* Jesus was born in a manger (not a throne, not even a clean, sweet-smelling place!), was visited by shepherds (neither distinguished nor so sweet-smelling), and lived a human life, of diaper rash and body odor, pain and sorrow, thirst and hunger, frustration and argument, and yes, bad smells. And he was called Jesus. The name of Jesus perhaps reconciles but more importantly *marries* the two truths of Jesus' nature – fully divine, fully human.

Years later, after the execution and resurrection of this divine and human man, St. Paul is trying to tell the story of Jesus to new Christians in Philippi. He reminds them and us that even though Jesus was in the form of God, he chose to take the posture of humility. The posture of humanity, obedience, emptying of the self in generosity and sacrifice. It's the story – the signified – that causes every knee to bend in loyalty and humility. The name is merely a sign: The sign that “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The name of Jesus is powerful, because of the story it invokes. Just as your name and story are powerful. You are more than the letters which make up your name, and you have the freedom to choose in what posture you write your story. How will you live through the struggles and suffering of human life? How might we assume the posture of humility, emptying ourselves, receiving radical grace and generosity in the way of Jesus? May we begin this year unified with the Creator through the Christ who saves – through the one we call Jesus.

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