

The Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ  
January 1, 2017  
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Numbers 6:22-27  
Psalm 8  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Luke 2:15-21

My parents named me Jedediah Dunning Holdorph, II. For the longest time, my name was too big for me, too big for my tiny britches. At the very least, it was quite a mouthful, but all the same, as a three- or four-year-old, I was encouraged to tell those I met my full name: Jedediah Dunning Holdorph II. (It took me clear into 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade before I could spell it all out correctly.)

I've grown into my name, I suppose. Over the past few decades of my life, people have often noted that Jedediah seems an apt name for a preacher and priest. And I suppose it is. The name means "beloved of God." And that's all well and good, but in truth I'm really named after a beloved uncle. Either one works.

People will sometimes guess that Jedediah is an Old Testament name. It only occurs once in the Bible. After King David and Bathseba have a child, God sent Nathan the prophet to tell them that his name is to be Jedidiah (2 Samuel 12:25). I find it amusing because neither his parents nor the Bible itself ever refers to him as Jedidiah thereafter, almost as if the name isn't good enough; they prefer the pedestrian name they've given him over the God-given name. And so, even though God Almighty named this child, he's only ever referred to by another name: Solomon.

This morning, we heard the story of when Jesus got his name. We told again part of the story we told here on Christmas Eve and Christmas, and then added one verse we didn't hear then:

*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.*

Eight days after this year's Christmas celebrations, we recall how Mary and Joseph followed the Jewish practices of their day and, eight days after the birth of their male child, had him circumcised and gave him the name of Jesus. The rest of the world celebrates today as New Year's Day; we celebrate it as the Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ – or, as it's more commonly called, "The Feast of the Holy Name" ... and that Holy Name, of course, is Jesus.

The Church has celebrated this feast day for a long, long time, though originally the focus was on the circumcision of Jesus rather than his name. The focus only shifted much later ... and for very political reasons. Franciscan and Dominican preachers, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, picked up on some of the language of St. Paul in today's letter to the Philippians:

*God ... gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ...*

They used devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus to overcome bitter and often bloody class struggles and family rivalries and vendettas. Even today, we sometimes forget that we come together here to seek our identity in Jesus rather than in social standing or any political affiliations.

Matthew says an angel came to Joseph in a dream before Jesus was born and told him what name to give the child (Matt. 1:20-25). Luke says the angel Gabriel came to Mary and told her (Luke 1:31). Either way, that's what they did together. They named the child Jesus – or in Hebrew “Yeshua” ... Joshua. It's a name with history, too big to impose upon an infant child, too big for his tiny britches (if I can put it that way). You might remember that after 40 years in the wilderness Moses died, and it was Joshua who led the People of God into the Promised Land.

And like most names in the Bible, it's not just a name; it has meaning. It translates as “God saves” or “the Lord is salvation” ... all of which is slightly problematic for us today. A word like “savior” or “salvation” has become such a church-y word that it's lost resonance and/or its meaning. For many of us still here in the church, we hardly hear it any longer. For those outside church circles, savior and salvation are words that get tuned out or have become turn-offs.

I doubt we can overcome the challenge here this morning, but let me at least offer a defense of such church-y words. I'll do so by way of a brief excerpt from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Early in the story, Ebenezer Scrooge complains about the intrusion of ghosts into his self-centered and well-ordered life. He asks the Ghost of Christmas Past:

“... what business brought [you] here?”

“Your welfare!” said the Ghost.

Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end. The Spirit must have heard him thinking, for it said immediately:

“Your reclamation, then. Take heed!”

Or, as the Muppets version of the story puts it: “Your salvation, then.”

The Ghosts of Christmas come to Scrooge for his welfare and for his salvation. And, as we readers clearly understand, Scrooge's welfare and his salvation are not merely matters of what will happen to him after he dies; they are also matters of the life he'll live while he may. To speak of Jesus as our Savior must, it seems to me, mean something like that, as well. Jesus is the one who gives us life ... who sets us free to live as God intends for us to live while we may.

I suppose I could stop there, offering these relatively few words on the name of Jesus. After all, this feast day today is specifically about that singular name. There's a graphic I've included in your bulletin today – a Christmas tree made of some of the many names that have been applied to Jesus: God; Rock; Savior; Messiah ... and on it goes.



Visually, the graphic suggests that all of these names rest upon the one name, Jesus.

So I suppose I could stop there ... and maybe I should.

But then I consider all the other names that have been given, not limited even to the names on the graphic art. At his baptism, a voice from heaven announced Jesus as “my Son, the Beloved.” In his own time, the people he met gave him other names, some derogatory and others complimentary: some called him a fraud and a glutton; others called him rabbi and Lord.

The Church has added other names over the centuries. We heard some of these names read here this past Christmas, lifting them from Isaiah, words George Frideric Handel put to music:

*For unto us a child is born,  
unto us a Son is given;  
and the government shall be upon His shoulder;  
and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

And there are so many other names. “In the beginning was the Word,” says the John in the very first words of that gospel, before going on to speak of Jesus as Light and Life – and later as Lamb and Way and Truth and Good Shepherd and on and on. And all these names are interconnected.

“In the beginning was the Word.” For many, the phrase seems abstract, but for John “Word” is always “Word made flesh”; it’s the Word that dwells among us.

Which calls us back once more to Christmas and another of the names by which we know Jesus: “Emmanuel” ... “God with us.”

Morton Kelsey once expressed the good news at the heart of such names this way:

I myself am very glad that the divine child was born in a stable, because my soul is very much like a stable, filled with strange, unsatisfied longings with guilt and animal-like impulses, tormented by anxiety, inadequacy, and pain. If the Holy One could be born in such a place, that One can be born in me also. I am not excluded.<sup>i</sup>

In other words, it matters how we name that child ... that Jesus.

To put it ever so slightly differently, whatever holy name we use for Jesus is one tells us who we are, as well.

For my part, I may have a relatively exotic name that traces its lineage back to an obscure verse in the Old Testament, a name which means “God beloved.” It may have been too big for me once upon a time, but I hope I’ve grown into it.

The same is true for all of us. We have been given a name that identifies us with the holy name of Jesus. Take a care not to shirk that holy name, sticking with a pedestrian given name rather laying claim to our God-given name. The name God gives us may seem too big for us. But we’ve been given a New Year, as well, a new invitation to grow into the holy name that has been given us.

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<sup>i</sup> Morton Kelsey, quoted in *The Anglican Digest* (Winter A.D. 2016, Vol. 58. No. 4), p. 30.