

Sunday, January 1, 2012
The Feast of the Holy Name
The Rev. Jeanne Hansknecht

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

In the name of the blessed Trinity: One Holy and Living God. Amen.

I hated my name when I was growing up. I had to contend with being called Jeannie and all of the words that rhymed with it. “I Dream of Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair” was often serenaded to me and I could never grow my hair out long enough to sport a pony tail or people would yank on it in hopes that I would grant them a wish like the genie on the 1960’s “I Dream of Jeannie” sitcom! What were my parents thinking? One day I had had enough and declared that I was hereby changing my name to the more sophisticated and doesn’t rhyme with anything Linda. For a week I wouldn’t answer to anything else. This ended when my parents sat me down and explained that I was named after Jeanne my godmother and my aunt Marie and these were two wonderful women and I should be proud to carry their name. With that instruction, I learned to appreciate and even love my name. I even miss being called Jeannie and probably won’t even punch anyone any more for serenading me or pulling my hair... but best not to test that because I am still pretty scrappy.

Kidding aside, one of the most important and daunting responsibilities of parents happens almost immediately after the baby is born—this new being must be given a name. Despite the zeal of some hospital clerks who will have you believe otherwise, parents today get a full five days to decide on a name before Baby Girl or Baby Boy gets placed on a birth certificate. Should you, after those five days, have namers remorse, you still have 45 days to make a change or a spelling correction. If Oprah Winfrey’s mother had known that, then Orpah, the sister-in-law of Ruth from the Hebrew Scriptures would be a name recognized in every household today. Or maybe not, maybe the accidental letter reversal shaped the person Oprah became.

Names are like that. They shape who we are. It saddens me that our culture has diminished the naming process down to the filing of paperwork. Naming requires thought prayer and ritual. I say this because giving someone a name, speaks that someone more fully into existence. Our names become us, we become our names. Our names are both public and intimate. We will tell our names to some and not to others. We let our names substitute our presence in correspondences and documents; we use them, and all applicable titles, to gain attention. But ultimately our names are how we are called, both by one another and by God.

In that Call tradition we have a rich history of being named by God. Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah. Jacob was named Israel. Simon was given the name Peter. Saul became Paul. In our recent nativity stories Mary becomes Favored One and Elizabeth’s and Zechariah’s son is named John instead of being named after his father. This is an especially good thing because Zechariah the Baptist just doesn’t have the same ring to it!

All of these new names which were given out by the Divine added something to the person. The new names made them stronger, giving them purpose and direction. This is something to keep in mind as we approach the Holy Family this morning. It is the 8th day after the birth of the boy child, the son of Mary, and we have been invited to his bris—the Jewish ritual of circumcision and naming.

It is an honor to be among them at this time. It means we are close friends or family and not company or random interlopers. It has been a week since the excitement and life goes on for most; people move on. The visitors have all left, the news of the birth of the Messiah has stopped spreading, the gifts have stopped coming and frankly, without the angelic hosts around the place is starting to look and smell like a barn. Mary and Joseph are now all alone with the newborn and they have to get on, by themselves, with the overwhelming task of parenting. Fortunately there is ritual to help them. On the eighth day, the baby must be circumcised and named and we are invited to be a part of that.

Seven is the number of nature. It is the number of days in the creation story. But eight, eight goes beyond that, surpassing what is natural and enters into the miraculous.¹ That is why the circumcision and naming happens on the eighth day—for the miracle the child is already and has yet to become. One would think that such an event would have been more appropriately done with the assistance of the angels or in the presence of the kings, but it wasn't. The Incarnation remained consistently humble. From the Annunciation to the Crucifixion, the mission and ministry of the Messiah all demonstrate God with us as the least among us, not as the 1%. And this commoner will become a household name. The beautiful thing is that it is not a rags to riches story. It is a rags are riches story! Nothing illustrates that better than the Covenant of Circumcision and the Naming of our Lord.

This particular Covenant was initiated by God and began with Abraham at his circumcision and naming. But on this day it is God's blood that is spilled and God who is given a new name: Jesus. It is an ordinary name, nothing special-- the Greek form of Joshua. A bit of a disappointment really from the promised "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Would the shepherds have dropped everything to come and witness the baby if the angel of the Lord had told them his name?

"Be not afraid! I bring you good news of great joy! Come and behold... Josh." I don't see it happening, not without a Sir or a Lord or a King or something! And yet that is the invitation. That is OUR invitation. We are invited to behold the Messiah and come to his bris and the ceremony is to take place in a barn and the stench of the shepherds, the lowliest of occupations you can have and still be employed, their stench is still present, and the baby will be circumcised and we will name this wonderful counselor, mighty God prince of peace. We will name him Josh. That's our invitation and we are meant not just to behold it but to embrace it. Or as Paul says to the Philippians we are meant to exalt it: "so that at the name of (Joshua) every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that (Josh) is Lord."

It sounds wrong. It sounds impossible that we should exalt someone so common. And that is the miracle promised on the eighth day, not that God would take flesh and walk among us, but that we would love what is lowly, what is vulnerable, what is humble, what is ordinary as much as God does. Because that was Abraham. That was Sarah. That was Israel. That was Mary. That was John. That was Peter. That was Paul. That is us if we accept the invitation.

"After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus...." A name that has forever shaped who we are. Thanks be to God.

¹ "Why do we have a Circumcision?" By Rabi Aron Moss http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/160989/jewish/Why-do-we-have-a-Circumcision.htm