

## What's In A Name?

Today is a feast day of the church that we celebrate only rarely.

It comes 8 days after Christmas, and since that usually falls on a weekday, the larger community doesn't celebrate it.

Today's feast day is the feast of the Holy Name: the holy name of Jesus, given 8 days after his birth according to Jewish tradition.

First things first, Jesus was a Jew.

Probably for our congregation, that's a well-known fact, but believe me, there's plenty of folks who call themselves Christians who swear it t'aint so!

But it's true, and according to Jewish custom, he's taken to the synagogue to be circumcised and named.

What's in a name?

That's the question we are each of us invited to reflect upon today.

What's in a name?

Some names seem to describe ever so well the person who bears it.

Angelina Jolie --- "beautiful angel" --- seems a good fit for this philanthropist actress.

Bernie Madoff, who made off with so much of other people's money, is another example, but from the other side of the tracks.

Isabella Baumfree is a well-known woman who changed her name.

After many years as an African-American slave in the U.S., which included severe beatings, losing the man she loved, and bearing thirteen children, she walked away from slavery and became a Christian, a feminist, and a preacher.

She changed her name to Sojourner Truth and embodied her new name as she traveled and spoke truth to power for the rest of her life..

She once said:

“That little man in black there, (must have been a clergyman!) he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman!

Where did your Christ come from?

Where did Christ come from?

From God and a woman!

Man had nothing to do with Him.”

Sojourner Truth!

Names are, in a very real way, a pathway to our own identity.

For Jesus, whose name means “God Saves,” his identity is carved in the journey that brings us to this day of naming.

Traveling with his parents to his father’s hometown, you have to wonder, where are the relatives?

We here in Hawaii know all about welcoming family, close and

distant, when they arrive on our shores.

Sometimes we offer hospitality out of love, other times out of obligation.

But whether love or obligation, the hospitality is there.

Not so for Jesus and his folks.

The traditional family customs in ancient Israel were even stronger than ours today when it comes to taking care of relatives.

Life was so much more fragile then, and family ties were truly the ties that bind.

But not so for the holy family.

Mary and Joseph might have expected hospitality from their family the night of Jesus' birth, but for one thing: their families would no longer take them in.

Perhaps it is shame at an unwed teen; the too quick to judge crowd who sizes up the situation and decides these are cast-offs who are rightfully left to fend for themselves.

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus embraces outsiders, because from the very day of his birth, Jesus himself is an outsider: only shepherds and angels attend this child and his parents -- because no one else will.

And so he is named: Jesus, meaning God Saves.

And with that naming, Jesus receives his identity.

And with that identity, Jesus begins a life that points to a God who saves us in ways that cannot be imagined; not with shock and awe, but through humble surrender, kind acceptance and giving all the way to death, death on a cross.

T.S. Eliot, a long time ago, wrote a book of poems about cats.

For some reason, I seem to be preoccupied with cats these days...

That book later became the hit musical that played for longer than just about any play on Broadway.

One of the poems, and later, one of the songs, is about the names for cats.

Each cat, we are told, has three names.

The first is the name given by humans, like Lady and Snowy and Fluffy.

The second is the name given by other cats; harder to pronounce and more mysterious in meaning: names like Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat.

And then there is the third name, a name the cat meditates upon as he sits on the arm of the couch, or gazes out of the window, a name the cat embraces and massages and rolls within, a name known only to the cat herself, it is the secret name of the cat.

And it occurs to me on this Sunday in which we celebrate the Holy Name, that we too have three names.

First is our given name.

Some folks love their names, others hate them, most are perhaps indifferent.

But these are the names we are known by to the Social Security Administration, and that wet behind the ears security guard as we try to board a plane; it is our most public, and therefore least revealing, name.

Second, we are most of us nick-named or given names of affection by our family and closest friends.

Girlie and Boy and Butch and Honey and Sweetie.

Our 11 year old is named Alexandra Teatuahere.

Alexandra meaning “Helper of Humanity” and Teatuahere meaning “The Love of God” – her name means “The helper of humanity is the love of God.”

I call her TTH.

And then there is our third name.

Each of you has this third name, although sometimes we forget.

In this world where, on the one hand, we have Tim Tebow who overlooked Jesus cautioning us to pray privately, not to make a public spectacle of private devotion; and on the other hand we have Bill Mahrer, the comedian, who can't seem to get his considerable intellect to grapple with Christianity at anything above the kindergarten level, it's easy to forget our secret name.

Yet this is the name that we are each of us given by he before whom every head shall bow, before whom every knee shall bend, in heaven

and on earth, and under the earth ---

Your secret name, and mine, one you might sit on the arm of the couch with and meditate upon, one you might embrace and let it embrace you.

As you meander over the course of your spiritual journey from last year til now; as you recognize moments of gain, and times of loss; if you have stumbled, and if you have risen again, hold dearly to your secret name; and let it hold tight to you.

Our secret name helps us when we are tempted to surrender to the prevailing culture of dog eat dog, our secret name is a life line when we hear the subtle whisper to seize control, rather than to let go and let God surprise us on our journey.

Meditating on your secret name, particularly as we begin the journey through another year, another milestone on a journey that will someday come to an end, let us always remember that "our destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things." Henry Miller.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

What is your secret name that is strength for this journey?

You know it well.

Your secret name is: "Child of God."

Thanks be to God!

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