

1.1.2023 Christmas 1, Name of Jesus

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

“Live in Jesus’ Name”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Blessed Christmas and Blessed New Year’s greetings to you all. Today, on the First Sunday of Christmas, January 1st, we also celebrate the commemoration of the Name of Jesus.

Today’s text from Luke recalls the moment when Jesus was named eight days after his birth. The naming of Jesus also recalls the angel’s instructions to Joseph in a dream, “*You shall call his name Jesus, to for he will save his people from their sin*” (Mt. 1:21). Joseph and Mary named the baby, “Jesus,” which means “Yahweh is salvation” or “the Lord is salvation.” January 1st is a commemoration of a name with the power to save and free us from our sins.

The reading for today from Philippians points to the power of Jesus’ name. Paul writes, “*Therefore God also highly exalted him and 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, to the glory of God the Father.*” Jesus’ name is a name above all other names; it is a name to call upon, a name to confess, and a name to live by each and every day.

Yet almost every day, how many of us haven’t heard Jesus’ name used in the following ways?

“Jesus, what did you say that for?”

“For the love of Jesus, please be quiet and let me think!”

“Sweet Jesus, would you just leave me alone for a second?”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Stop it, would you?”

Or, simply, “Jesus Christ!”

Now, it is certainly not my intent to offend anyone in this sacred place of worship, but I think nearly all of us, your pastor included, have probably heard or used Jesus’ name in these sorts of ways. (We might also include the familiar euphemisms for Jesus and Jesus Christ here as well – “Jeez,” “Gee Whiz,” “Jiminy Christmas,” “Jiminy Cricket,” “Jeepers Creepers”, etc.)

There’s a short story by the American writer, J.D. Salinger, in which he refers such usages of the divine name as “a low form of prayer.” I am, of course, not encouraging anyone to misuse Jesus’ name, I am only recognizing that in moments of stress and anger, we are nevertheless calling upon Jesus’ name. This is the point of the incarnation: Jesus helps us in all of our very human moments

of distress, prayer and praise, and even when “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom. 8:26).

The gospels teach us that Jesus encourages us to use his name. In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “*I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son*” (Jn. 14:13). In Matthew, Jesus says, “*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I among them*” (Mt. 18:20). Jesus encourages us to ask and pray in his name; Jesus encourages to gather in his name. In other words, our personal and corporate devotional life are to be centered in praying and gathering in Jesus’ name. We don’t gather in Paul’s name or pray in Luther’s name; it is Jesus’ name alone that saves us from our sin.

Some years ago, when I was working in Tokyo, I remember a conversation with a University of Tokyo graduate student who attended our church. He was what I would call “a seeker.” He was seeking a way to understand Christianity, and seeking to get to know Jesus. He was an extremely bright young person, and looked at Christianity as a complicated philosophical system. One day, he suddenly said, “No matter what you or anyone talks about, everything keeps coming back to Jesus!” Indeed, *everything comes back to Jesus* – the name and person of Jesus is the very center of the Christian faith.

Over the years, this conversation has reminded me of the one Jesus had with the rich young man, in which Jesus said, “*‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions*” (Mt. 19:21-22). Everything about Jesus comes back to his call to follow him in discipleship and to live in his name. Jesus’ name is not something we control, as if it were a private spiritual vending machine from which we might receive whatever we want; rather, Jesus’ name is given to us so that we might use it according to his purposes. In doing so, God is glorified through our lives.

Today’s reading from Philippians is perhaps the greatest explanation of Jesus and his name in scripture, revealing Jesus the servant who invites us to follow him. Paul is reminding us that everything comes back to Jesus, writing, “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...*” As we begin a new year, we hear again the invitation to be of the same mind as Christ – to identify ourselves with Jesus’ name.

Today’s hymn of the day, “In a Lowly Manger Born” (ELW 718), is a Japanese hymn usually sung during Christmas. On the first day of the new year, we realize that the birth of Jesus lifts our

minds upward to new life in him. The second verse of this hymn reads, “Visiting the lone and lost, steadying the tempest tossed, giving of himself in love, calling minds to things above...” To be of the same mind as Christ is to allow him to share in your humanity, so that when you feel alone or lost, stressed-out or angry, calling upon his name will lift you upward into his saving grace.

Paul continues goes on describing the mind of Christ Jesus, “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.*”

Like the hymn for today, Jesus visits us when we are alone or lost, calling “our minds to things above.” To live in Jesus’ name is to share his mind, emptying ourselves so that filled with his grace, we might serve alongside of him.

As you greet others with “Happy New Year,” remember that the year is happy and joyful precisely because we begin it in Jesus’ name. His name is grace and life that will save and free you from your sin.

Everything comes back to Jesus. Begin this year with the same mind as Christ. Empty yourself again and again, so that he might fill you with his grace.

Live in Jesus’ name – you will become grace and life for others. Amen.