

J.j. St. Paul's Lutheran Church, 57th & Broadway, Sacramento, CA
The Name Day of Jesus-B, January 1, 2012 A.D.

Luke 2:15-21 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16: So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17: When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18: and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19: But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20: The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. 21: 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.

NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES!

Grace, mercy and peace will be with us, from God the Father and Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. Amen.

We are a people who name things -- we need to in order to make sense of our world. But names are rather arbitrary, aren't they? Shakespeare wrote somewhere, "What is in a name? A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet." So what about your name -- do you like it? or has it bothered you your whole life?

We need to give names to things.

Many years ago, after my first year in seminary, we were assigned summer "field work."

I was sent to Cleveland, Ohio to help a pastor in the suburb of So. Euclid with VBS, and then to canvass the neighborhood, door by door, for prospective church members. I lived with the pastor's family, and there were three children, one of whom was about three y.o.

He was playing on the floor w/ his brother, and I heard him say, "That's my 'fla-gert-able.'"

What's a 'fla-gert-able'? you might ask.

Well I saw that it was a convertible car he was talking about, so, since I had taught parochial school for a year, I thought I would just help the little guy learn the right name.

So I said, Timmy, look at me, that car you have, it's a 'con-vert-able.'

Listen, say: 'CON' -- 'con,' he said; 'VERT' -- 'vert;' 'A' -- 'a'; 'BLE' -- 'bull.'

Good! Now say it, 'con-vert-able.' "FLA-GERT-ABLE."

Well, so much for my teaching skills -- he knew the meaning of his word, and that had to be good enough for now.

Part I. The Power of Names

Point 1. Today, on the Name Day of Jesus, we review the meaning & power of names. In the ancient Near East, states the Harper's Bible Dictionary, "*great significance was attached to personal names, as they revealed character and identity and signified existence.... They served as an important symbol, an element of creative activity. To know the name of a person or thing is to know its essential nature and to have power over it.*"

For example, back at the beginning, our first ancestor, Adam, was given the authority to name the animals, thus giving humans "dominion" over the rest of creation.

E.g., there are names still today that "reveal essential nature." I think of job description names, such as Smith, or Baker, or Tailor.

I've been going to my barber for 17 years now -- what do you think his name is?

No, it's not Barber; it IS Shearer, however? How could he NOT be a barber? ? ?

Names have power still today.

If you have a business, e.g., you advertise because you want your name out there.

If your name shows up in the DUI list in the local paper you could lose your job because you don't have a good name anymore.

I could lose my job as a hospice chaplain if I don't have a clean driving record.

We all want to keep our good names free and clear of any scandal.
It just makes good sense.

But here's what does NOT make good sense: When God the Father gave His One and Only Son to be born, He told the angel to announce it to shepherds.

To shepherds, of all people! Shep = sheep, herd = herder: "sheep-herder."

Everybody knew that sheep-herders were like hooligan types -- no good.

They did not have good reputations -- did not have good names.

A shepherd was not allowed to testify as a witness at a legal proceeding.

Perhaps that explains what St. Luke tells us in this verse:

17: When [the shepherds] saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18: and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Folks were amazed, but that was it -- we are not told that they believed the shepherds.

No wonder, shepherds were not to be trusted. They did not have a good name.

Point 2. But we must be careful about trusting in names.

A familiar saying in the world of work is: "It's not what you know, but who you know."

And so we are a people of "name-droppers."

We try to get to know important people so we can drop their names when needed.

Thus we can understand the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

They trusted Moses and his Law, and they would "drop" his name when their ways were criticized by Jesus.

The result? When Someone greater than Moses had come, the Scribes could not move to faith in the One who was the fulfillment of all prophecy.

They were stuck to a "law & order" religion, just where many who call themselves

Christians are still stuck today -- just obey the rules and you'll be saved, right?

In our second lesson today, St. Paul puts it this way to the Christians in Galatia:

23 Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. 24 So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. [Gal. 3]

"Held captive..." That's certainly stuck. "...under a guardian..." stuck there, too.

Lutherans emphasize Law and Gospel, but we don't want to be stuck under the Law of God -- we are not able to keep the Law -- we can't obey the "Rules."

It would be too bad -- worse than too bad -- to be eternally stuck trusting the name of Moses the Lawgiver instead of turning to faith in Christ.

Part II. Thank God There Is a Better Name than Moses Today

Point 3. That Name is the Name Above Every Name

That name is Jesus.

The Evangelist Matthew tells how Joseph was about to divorce Mary, but the Angel of the Lord told Joseph in a dream that he was to keep his "troth" with Mary.

Furthermore, he was to name the baby which was to be born Jesus. Why? Because He would be the One to "...save his people from their sins." [Mt. 1:21]

That's what Jesus' name means: in Hebrew, **Yeh-shua** -- "Yahweh saves."

Think about it. "Yeh" or "Yah" or "Yahweh" is the Old Testament name for the God who made his covenant of salvation with Abraham.

And when Abraham's descendants ended up in slavery in Egypt, it was Yahweh who appeared to Moses at the burning bush and enlisted him in saving the Children of Israel from that captivity of so many years.

Indeed, Moses' brother Aaron, as High Priest, was instructed to put Yahweh's name upon the people of Israel in the familiar words of the Aaronic benediction:

24 The LORD bless you and keep you;

25 the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

26 the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. [Num. 6]

Three times he was to put the sacred name upon the people. (Note: when you see the name, LORD all in caps, it is a translation of Jahweh, the name of God too sacred to say out loud.)

Three times -- the holy name -- could that have anything to do with the Trinity?

So with this threefold name upon them, Moses led them to the promised land, but they were still stuck under Law, not ready for the full revelation of God's eternal plan.

Years passed. The era of Judges gave way to the era of Kings: Saul, David, Solomon.

Then came the divided Kingdoms of Judah & Israel -- their evil kings brought about the Babylonian Captivity and the destruction of Solomon's beautiful temple.

But the time was not yet.

God saved a remnant from that captivity, but He still held his ancient people under the strong arm of the Law so as to ready them for the Coming One.

Finally, St. Paul tells us in our second lesson today:

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. [Gal. 4]

Adopted children, we are. Now my wife is an adoptions expert, and I checked this: when you adopt someone, though they already have a name, you get to give them a new name -- new first name, new middle name, and your family name.

That's what God has done for us: He redeemed us by the precious blood of His Son,

Who this day was circumcised and named Jesus, the Savior. He adopted us!

At our Baptisms we were adopted and were given the name Christian.

Picture this: The teen-aged Virgin Mary in that stable of Bethlehem talks to Joseph when Jesus is a few days old: "My husband, we must go to the temple on the eighth day, it is the Law." "But Mary, Jerusalem is five miles away; can you walk that far?" "Joseph, we must go to have him circumcised; do you have money for the gift to the priests?" "You're right, Mary, I'll see if I can find a handyman job here in Bethlehem -- I'll get the money somehow."

Luke writes, v. 21: 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.

And so they came to the temple in Jerusalem, and the blood of the Savior was first shed as He submitted to the Law and was circumcised.

There He was given the name specified by the Angel, the Name Above Every Name, 'Jesus! "...for he will save his people from their sins." [Mt. 1:21]

There was the beginning of the end of our slavery to "the elemental principles of the world," as Paul phrases it in the verse just before our second Lesson today.

So on this day so long ago, our Savior Jesus, "...born of woman, [was placed] under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." [Gal. 4]

Last Point. And So We Celebrate our Faith.

When we were baptized our names were written in the heavenly Book of Life.

Our names are precious in the sight of our Heavenly Father who sent His Son in the fulness of time.

We rejoice with the Psalmist in our Psalm for this day and exclaim,

"O LORD our Lord, how exalted is your name in all the world!"

Wait a minute, what did I hear? God's name is in all the world? Oh, very true!

Both the O.T. and the N. T. teach us that God is Triune, three in one. right?

OK, what is the world made of? Three things only: Matter, space, time; & those three are one.

And, watch this, each of those is an absolute trinity as well! Matter = energy, motion, phenomena or appearances; space = length breadth and height, no more, no less; and time, surely you know -- past, present & future, an absolute trinity -- no more, no less!

"O LORD our Lord, how exalted is your name in all the world!"

What's that? It's New Year's Day, Pastor, you haven't said anything about New Year's.

With Martin Luther I say, "These and all other things we have from Rome we shall let pass away and we shall celebrate the Name of Jesus this day."

But Pastor, other pulpits are speaking about new year's resolutions today -- don't you want to give us some practical direction?

Yes, I do; here it is from St. Paul himself: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." [Acts 16:31] and God the Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth, even into new year's resolutions for the amendment of your sinful lives.

Now to Him who has the Name Above All Names, Jesus our Savior, be all glory and honor unto the ages of ages. Amen.