

THE NAME OF JESUS TELLS A STORY
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The Solemnity of the Holy Name of Jesus
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Oh Lord, may we ponder in our hearts like Mary,
and may we live our lives in the name of Jesus. Amen.

When I began to think about this feast day of the Holy Name, I first thought about the power of names and the stories they tell. I confess I have read a lot of fantasy books in my day. In fantasy, there's a trope of the power of names. If a sorcerer knows your true name, he can wield power against you using it. This idea shows up in fairy tales as well; think of how Rumpelstiltskin is defeated when the young queen finds out his name that he thought she would never guess.

Names have a certain power and they tell a story, though for most of us our name is what we've made of it. Some names become very popular and some fall out of fashion, but they often mean something to us.

We often go by different names with different people. For example, you know me as Lainie. It's my preferred name and it's what I ask people to call me, but the name on my driver's license and bank account is Elaine. My children call me Mom or Mommy. I often call them Pumpkin or Sweetie or even Chatterbox. My fathers had rather bizarre nicknames for me. I almost hesitate to tell you what they are--that's how weird they are.

My dad called me Fig, because he called my sister Prune and Fig seemed to be the natural sister of a Prune, in his mind. So that is odd enough, but my stepdad (incidentally I called my stepdad Daddy Bob, which tells its own story) nicknamed me Düsseldorf or Doozy. I cannot possibly explain how I ended up with the name of a German city, except that he would always say that I was a real Doozy and perhaps it grew from that.

These different names can tell a story about me, though I'm not sure what Düsseldorf and Fig tell you, other than that they came out of both humor and love. The name of Grace Church also tells a story. I think there are few better names for a church than to proclaim and extend the Grace of God in the name.

That brings me to the story of the Name of Jesus. Surely, when Mary hears from the shepherd about their angelic visitation, she was recalling her own experience. Now, this is something I think we don't always consider about this passage. Eight days after the birth, Mary and Joseph fulfill the law of circumcision and name the child Jesus. Eight days later. Just eight days.

Eight days since Christmas, or, for Mary, since giving birth to her firstborn child. Mothers may remember what that time is like. Mother and baby both have not fully recovered from the birth experience after a bit over a week. It is a rough time both physically and mentally after the first baby. So it can be tough dealing with anything, even a required religious ritual, after only a little over a week. There is no mention of what Mary was actually going through-- other than that she was pondering, but I guarantee she was in recovery while pondering.

It is a beautiful time, being a new mother, but it is also a painful and stressful time. I love that we get this glimpse of Mary in the middle of the story, pondering and treasuring all of this in her heart. I picture her thinking of it while up late in the night dealing with a possibly cranky newborn, while others slept. I know we sing that he's tender and mild, but in my experience, no baby is tender and mild all the time, sweet though they may be.

I'm sure many of you have heard this before: Jesus is the Aramaic version of Joshua, and it means *God Saves*. The important people of the Bible often had significant names. Abraham's name means *Father of Many*. Isaac means *Laughter*, reflecting his mother's laughing at the idea of her conceiving a child at an advanced age. Jacob's name changed to Israel for *One Who Struggles with God* after his supernatural wrestling match.

Names have power and some have more meaning than others. As Christians, we often use the Name of Jesus as part of our worship and as part of our prayer life. If I am praying extemporaneously, rather than with a prayer book, I almost always say "in the Name of Jesus" before Amen, a habit I learned growing up in evangelical churches.

We reference the Name of Jesus in the Prayer of St. Chrysostom, which we will say near the end of our service today: "Almighty God...you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together **in his Name** you will be in the midst of them..." [*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 102] It is in his Name that we pray; very specifically it is not in the name of ourselves or in the name of the Episcopal Church but in the Name of Jesus.

So the Name of Jesus tells a story and it's integral to our experience as his followers. What is that story? God saves and God loves us. We can see that in our passage from Galatians for today: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Abba, from what I understand, is a very intimate name like Daddy. And God loves us as beloved children. We are beloved and we have that assurance in the Name of Jesus.

From that assurance, we can act as the beloved children of God. How do we live as children of God, bathed in that love? We can live out a life of love, of compassion--not just calling on the Name of Jesus but living like we follow Jesus. We side with the oppressed and not with the oppressor. We reach out with love in action and not just with words. In the Name of Jesus, we can change the world around us and bring forth the kingdom of God. That's what it means to not just proclaim the Name of Jesus but to live in his Name, to tell the story of that name with our lives.

In the Name of Jesus, we can reach out to refugees, as we so recently did for Afghan refugees. In the name of Jesus, we can feed and house the hungry and the homeless, which is something Grace Church also does. In the Name of Jesus, we can speak up for the marginalized and the hurting in our society.

Sometimes we might have to speak out in the Name of Jesus to push back against those who would harm others or be hateful in that same Name. We can all think of times when the Name of Jesus has been turned against the meaning of Jesus--to make it not about how God saves and loves us but instead about retribution, judgmentalism, and hatred.

I want to share a quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who so recently passed. He said:

God is transfiguring the world right this very moment through us because God believes in us and because God loves us. What can separate us from the love of God? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And as we share God's love with our brothers and sisters, God's other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no opposition that cannot be ended, no hunger that cannot be fed, no wound that cannot be healed, no hatred that cannot be turned into love, no dream that cannot be fulfilled. [*God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* by Desmond Tutu, <https://a.co/iBo1axR>]

This is both a promise and a challenge. We are beloved children of God, and that means we have a calling to share that love with others. May we love the world in the Name of Jesus. Amen.