

“Naming”

The Feast of the Holy Name

The First Sunday After Christmas, Year B

January 1, 2006

Texts: Exodus 34:1-8 / Psalm 8 / Romans 1:1-7 / Luke 2:15-21

Growing up, I was known as “the brain” of the family, and my brother Jeff was “the jock.” My brother Jeff will turn 50 this year. He has been the headmaster of a school and he teaches high school history and geography, but he is still known as “the jock.” I am now an Episcopal priest, no longer tied to an institution of higher learning, but I am still known as “the brain.” Names and naming are important. How many of us growing up had particular nicknames. Some of them were not so flattering, like “Shorty” or “Lumpy” or “Big’un.” But others reveal a particular attribute or understanding of who we are. In the south, “bubba” is often used for an older brother. It is a term of endearment, but also of responsibility. Names have great meaning.

Today is the Feast of the Holy Name, which is always celebrated on January 1. Since January 1 falls on a Sunday this year, we get to celebrate this important feast day of the Church. Jewish tradition expected that every male child would be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth and dedicated to God during a ceremony of great solemnity. On this day, the male child would also be given his name. In the case of Christ, He was given the name that the angel Gabriel had foretold – Jesus, or in Aramaic, Yeshua...Joshua, which means “Yahweh saves” or simply “God saves.” Do you hear that? Jesus’ name means “God saves.” Was there any more appropriate name than that?

In our passage from Exodus, God makes Himself known to Moses on Mount Sinai. The text says, “And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the Name of the Lord” (Ex 34:5). And the Lord passed before Moses and then proclaimed what that Name, Yahweh, meant. Recall that in ancient Judaism it was forbidden for Jews to speak the name or write the name of God. Instead, Jews would use the proper title *Adonai*, which means Lord, when they spoke of God.

Naming was important in the eastern world. Recall that Moses himself, when He first encounters God and is told to go to Egypt and ask the Pharaoh to release the Jews from bondage, asks for God’s name. From the third chapter of Exodus (3:13-15),

¹³ Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴ And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ” ¹⁵ Moreover God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations.’

God tells Moses in that, in the Hebrew, that His Name is “I was what I was, I am that I am, I will be what I will be.” In other words, His Name is forever, from the beginning of time to the end of the age. His character is unchanging

In our passage from Exodus, God goes on to give seven aspects of His character (expounded in verse 6). OT scholar Philip Graham Ryken says that this verse is “one of the most important in the entire Bible” (*Exodus*, p. 1041). The attributes of God include: 1) merciful; 2) gracious; 3) slow to anger; 4) abounding in steadfast love...; 5) and faithfulness; 6) forgiving iniquity; 7) holy – the ultimate Judge.

First, God is merciful, compassionate. Psalm 103 (vs. 13) says that

⁸ *The LORD is **merciful** and **gracious**,
Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.*

⁹ *He will not always strive with us,
Nor will He keep His anger forever.*

¹⁰ *He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our iniquities.*

¹¹ *For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His **mercy** toward those who fear Him;*

The story is told of a woman who “took a friend with her when she went to a photographer to have her picture taken. The beauty parlor had done its best for her. She took her seat in the studio and fixed her pose. While the photographer was adjusting his lights in preparation for taking the shot, she said to him, ‘Now be sure to do me justice.’” The friend who had accompanied her said, with a twinkle in her eye, “My dear, what you need is not justice but mercy.” We all need mercy when we stand before the Almighty God and compare ourselves with the perfect God-man, Jesus.

Second, God is gracious. Again, Psalm 103 (which I just read) states that the Lord is gracious. Grace, the Prayer Book Catechism says, is “God’s favor toward us, unearned and undeserved;...” I have also heard it described by the acrostic, God’s Reward At Christ’s Expense.” God first loved us and gave His Son for us, not because we were so great, so full of merit, but simply because He chose to love us...that is grace.

Third, God is slow to anger, patient, long-suffering. Again, Psalm 103 repeats the expression,

⁸ *The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.*

⁹ *He will not always strive with us,
 Nor will He keep His anger forever.*

The apostle Peter states in his second letter (3:9), “The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that **any** should perish but that **all** should come to repentance.”

Fourth, God is “abounding in steadfast love.” Not just “love” but “steadfast love.” God always follows through on His love. God says to Moses, again in the book of Exodus (20:5-6), “*For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,* ⁶ *but showing mercy to [the thousandth generation], to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*” God admits that the sins of the fathers can be visited upon succeeding generations. But, He also admits that a faithful generation will reap rewards for thousands of generations to come. This is quite an encouragement for those of us who have children and grand-children; encouragement to follow God and keep His commandments, if not for our own sakes then for the sakes of our descendants.

Fifth, God is “faithful.” Unlike us -- who can be fickle and unfaithful, loving God one day, trying to do His will, and the next day trying to do our own, wanting our own way, in effect rebelling against God -- God is always faithful. He is always looking out for our best interests. He returns our unfaithfulness and selfishness with His own true faithfulness, again to the thousandth generation.

Sixth, God is forgiving. He says in our passage from Exodus that He is willing to forgive three things: iniquity, transgression, and sin. Iniquity means to “turn aside” from what is good. This is a more passive type of wrong-doing. Sin itself is a more general term that encompasses all wrong-doing. But, the Hebrew used for transgression can also be translated as “rebellion” a “willful violation...involving not merely disobeying a rule or regulation, but betraying the relationship one has with the King.” But, the point is that, regardless of the sin, regardless of how you committed the sin, God, even the God of the OT, is willing to forgive you.

But, seventh, there is a warning. God is forgiving, yes. God is long-suffering, yes. But, God’s patience is not infinite. He is long-suffering, but not forever-suffering. In the end, He is the Judge. Our passage says that He will “by no means clear the guilty.”

Brothers and sisters, “The God who passed by Moses in glory is the God whom we need. We need a compassionate God who cares about our situation, a gracious God who gives us what we don’t deserve, a patient God who won’t give up on us, a loving God who is faithful to His promise, and a forgiving God who takes away our sin” (Ryken, p. 1044). And here is the Good News that we celebrate this Christmas season. This God came down from heaven and became a man, born of a virgin, and He walked among us, and He gave Himself for us, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. And His Name is...Jesus. Yeshua. Joshua. God saves.

The Holy Scripture says that Jesus was “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14); that He was slow to anger, though angry He could get (witness the story of the money-changers in Mark 3:5); that He showed us how to love by giving His life for our own and loved us with a love that was “wide and long and high and deep” (Eph 3:18); that he was forgiving, even speaking from the cross to his betrayers

and persecutors, “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.” Christ and Christ alone embodies all the attributes of God that are written in our passage from Exodus. When God passed by Moses on the mountain, He was also telling Moses about God the Son. “God was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord God of compassion and grace” (Ryken, p. 1045). And this was confirmed for Moses and Jesus’ disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Moses was privileged to catch a glimpse of the Great I am. But, we have experienced Him in the flesh and He was truly “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands [of generations], forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” And His Name is Jesus. Alleluia, Alleluia! *Amen.*

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