

Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8
Galatians 4:4-7
or Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 2:15-21

In the name of One God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

In the 80's there were very few American households that did not gather around the television once a week and watch as actor George Wendt burst through the front door of a neighborhood bar in Boston and heard a huge chorus of voices join together and shout, "Norm!" after which his character, Norm Peterson would be greeted by a bartender and would give one of his classic responses. One of my favorites was the night that Woody said, "What's going on, Mr. Peterson?" and Norm responded, "A flashing neon sign in my gut that says, 'Insert Beer Here'." The theme song of that classic TV series, "Cheers," contains these words,

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.
You wanna be where you can see,
our troubles are all the same
You wanna be where everybody knows
Your name.

We all want to be where everybody knows, and uses our name.

There is power in naming something, or someone. In the Harry Potter series, the most villainous of all villains is often referred to as "he who must not be named." Even

saying the name of Lord Voldemort meant that something bad might befall the speaker. There is, indeed power in naming a thing.

Even as children we are aware of this power. We are frightened by some strange sound or shadow in our rooms and then, when mom or dad comes in and shows us what was casting the shadow or causing the noise – in other words, names the thing – we can obtain control over the thing, or our fear of it. That’s the power of a name.

Luke tells us that on the eighth day after His birth, Mary and Joseph took their newborn son to be circumcised, as was, and is still the requirement for Jewish males. During the liturgy of circumcision, the baby boy is named. That day long ago in ancient Palestine, the Moyle – the specially trained Rabbi who performs the ritual of circumcision – said something similar to, “Name this child,” to which Mary and Joseph responded, “Jesus.” And there it was. He was named.

Throughout the ancient Near East, it has always been thought that names carried with them a description of the person or thing named. People chose names for their children very carefully because the name should describe some aspect of a child’s character or identity. A “good” name would say something about who the parents hoped and prayed their child would become. Jesus is a Latinized version of Joshua or *Yehoshua* which, in Hebrew means “Yahweh is Salvation,” “Yahweh delivers” or “Yahweh rescues”. The Angel of the Lord had come to Mary and told her that she would have a

son and would name him Jesus. So, God had ordained that this child would be known as God's salvation, God's deliverer or God's rescuer. There's certainly power in THAT name. But there is something even more powerful about GIVING that name to THIS child.

After all, Jesus was not **just** the firstborn child of Joseph the carpenter and Mary of Nazareth. He was the incarnation of God; God among us; the God of all Creation, as human as any of us.

One of the tenets of Judaism is that the name of God cannot be said or written by humans. People cannot possibly know the character or true identity of God, so they cannot possibly name God. Jews write God's name with asterisks where the vowels would go (Y*HW*H) and they do not speak it. (If you really want to impress your friends at cocktail parties, this way of expressing God is called the tetragrammaton). There have always been ways for Jews to express that it is God about whom they are speaking. From the time of Creation to the Exodus from Egypt, or at least until the covenant with Abraham, God was referred to as *Elohim* meaning "strong God," which was taken from the name of gods in the days when the people had individual household gods, before they became acquainted with the singular God of all creation. Later the chosen name to speak became *Adonai*, which became translated as "Lord," in English. Lordship may describe one aspect of God's character, but certainly not all of it.

The world into which Jesus was born knew only a God who was so distant from the people, so apart, so “other worldly,” that God’s name could not even be spoken. This was the same God who spoke with Moses from a burning bush and warned him not to look at God or else Moses would die. Elijah tried to glimpse this same God in gale force winds, earthquake and fire, but could only find God in the still, small voice. This was the same God about whom the prophet Ezra said the people could not lift their faces heavenward because they were not worthy to be **seen** by God. No wonder the coming ministry of this little child would be such a challenge and such a threat to Jewish authorities. Jesus – God’s salvation – brought not only a name to God, but a face as well. Suddenly people could not only speak ABOUT God, they could speak TO God and could SEE God’s face as they did so. How much power is there in THAT?

Look at the Old Testament stories, full of the wonder and might of God, but also full of God’s wrath against humanity. And who could blame God for being angry and vengeful? All God ever asked of humankind was to love God with all their hearts, minds souls and strength, and to follow some fairly straightforward commandments. But the people could never seem to accomplish this seemingly simple task. Instead, they created false gods and they broke every commandment given them. God tried everything to get their attention; banishment, flood, fire and brimstone, enslavement, and freedom from slavery. God sent prophet after prophet to the people to tell them what their mistakes had

been and to try to return them to God's path. Nothing worked. Until finally God decided to try a new way.

As St. Paul tells us in this morning's reading from the letter to the Galatians,

When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

God decided to approach humans in an entirely different way, as one of us. And from that day on, we occupied a different place in God's created order.

In the fullness of time, God sent a baby named Jesus – God's salvation – to take us from being fearful subjects of an angry ruler, to being children of the Living God. Jesus came into the world to redeem us from slavery to sin and to show us the face of a loving God. Jesus brought us close to God in a way that had never been experienced before. He did something that could never have been accomplished by a prophet or a teacher or a great religious leader.

The angel said to (Mary), '(N)ow, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, ... He will be the Son of God.'

Jesus – what a name.

Amen