

“What’s In a Name?”

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Numbers 6:22-27

Luke 2:15-21

By now in the Christmas season, our liturgy has already shared the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds in the field, announcing the birth of the Messiah, and the arrival of the curious and worshipful shepherds in Bethlehem, to glorify this baby. But today’s passage adds just one more verse: “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.”

In the church lectionary cycle, January 1 is called “Holy Name of Jesus” day. Normally, January 1 is not happening on a Sunday, so we just skip over the naming of Jesus— and in fact, there is a whole separate set of readings we could have used, for the First Sunday After Christmas. But since this Holy Name of Jesus day so rarely falls on a Sunday, let’s just dive into its meaning— what is in this holy name?

Someone close to me has the tendency to take the Lord’s name in vain. In fits of frustration, the holy name of Jesus Christ sometimes tumbles out of their mouth— to which I add, without fail, “--is awesome!” In all seriousness, this name holds power; maybe that’s why some find it so satisfying to say when things are falling apart, and also why we aren’t supposed to toss it into the air without respect to the one behind the name.

Jesus gets a number of names: Messiah, Christ, Son of God, Son of Human, Savior, Teacher, Lord, Shepherd, Word... George Frideric Handel, drawing from the prophet in Isaiah, attributes to Jesus the names, “Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

We could talk about all these names and their meaning. But there’s one name the angel told Mary to call her baby, before he was even conceived in the womb, and that is “Jesus.” In Hebrew, the name means “YHWH Saves.” God saves. The name is a faith statement in and of itself. A prayer. Save us, God. Save me, God.

What does Jesus save us from? What do we need saving from? One of the statements in the traditional Presbyterian liturgy for membership is asking if you accept Jesus Christ as Savior. A lot of people wonder, “What does this mean?” Does it mean that Jesus will save us from going to hell— but that those who don’t make this commitment to Jesus *will* go to hell? I’m not sure that’s a Jesus I even *want* to believe in. My love for Jesus and my choice to follow him is not so much from a place of fear, but from a motivation in love— I am so drawn to his vision of what love for God and what love for our neighbor looks like, that I can’t help but to say yes and to follow.

A ticket into heaven isn't how the early church looked at the salvation of Jesus, anyway. The world Jesus was born into— the world of first century Palestine, which lived under domination by the Roman Empire— sought saving from the oppressive rule of tyranny. This was a shared desire by Jews, whose covenant with God always seemed to be thwarted by oppressive rulers: first Egypt, then Assyria, then Babylon, and Rome.

The expectation for the Messiah that would save God's people was for a king who would be a military ruler so mighty that he would secure peace for Israel once and for all. That's not what we got in Jesus— born into poverty, among livestock, forced to flee, and killed by the very empire his people expected him to be able to overthrow.

We can look at salvation as winning— whether winning the riches of heaven over the fire of hell, or as winning in the military sense, of conquering— over sin and death and the fiery pits of hell. And, to be honest, you can find scriptures that support both those ideas of what salvation is.

Instead, I choose to look at salvation as *blessing*. But again, I'm not seeing blessing the same as being lucky, or healthy, or rich, or privileged. I'm seeing *blessing* as the experience of God-with-us, which is what the name Emmanuel means. Jesus saves us and blesses us by showing us how God can be made flesh in us, in our lives— there need not be a gulf between our human experience, and our experience of God. When God instructed Moses on how to train his brother Aaron and all those who would be priests to Israel, Moses was to teach them to offer this blessing to God's people:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord's face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.
"So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

According to Numbers, in God's name, there is blessing. The verbs in this blessing— in addition to God *bless* you— are this:

God keeps you. These are words of God's safety and protection.
God's face shines on you. These are words of God's love for you.
God is gracious to you. These are words of God's mercy and forgiveness and generosity.
God lifts God's countenance— or face— to you. These are words of God's attention and care.
Knowing God *sees* you.
God gives you peace. We know what this means— intellectually. When we know what it means experientially, then that indeed is a blessing.

God told Moses that when the priests put God's name on God's people, God will bless them. Jesus's name— which means God Saves, is a blessing too.

My choice to follow Jesus blesses me in these ways. And now, I want to ask you, as we walk along the creases of one year giving way to the next, to look at the landscape of your lives, and do an inventory of where you are in need of blessing, or where you are in need of salvation. To do so, I will ask you to think through these questions, based on the Numbers blessing.

God keep you. Where do you need God's safety and protection? What would it feel like to be safe, and protected?

God's face shine on you. Where do you need to feel God's deep love for you? What would it feel like to gather yourself in the warmth of that love, to feel God's face shine on you?

God be gracious unto you. Where do you need God's mercy? How do you experience God's forgiveness? How can you receive, and share, God's generosity?

God lifts God's face to you. What does it feel like to be the subject of God's attention and care? What do you want God to *notice* about you? How do you want to be seen?

God give you peace. Peace for a broken world. Peace for a broken people. Peace for a broken heart. Where are you most longing for peace right now?

Now, as much as we as individuals need to take in what it means to experience God's blessing, this blessing was actually offered to a community. There is a phrase, "Blessed to be a blessing." When we are in line with God's love and blessing, our response as God's people is not to hoard this blessing for ourselves, but instead it is to go forth and be a blessing to someone else. Jesus showed us what that looks like: working in a community to advocate for the oppressed, to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and befriend the outcast. And sometimes, simply doing those things can be our pathway to feeling and experiencing blessing.

Christians, God's name is on you. And it blesses you. May these blessings be made real to you in the new year. And may you know, you are a blessing to someone else, and to God too.