

Name of Jesus, 2012

A New Name for a New Year

Numbers 6:22-27; Philippians 2:1-13; Luke 2:15-21

“To the church of God that is in Corinth,” the Apostle opens that letter, “to those who are made holy [set apart] in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on *the name* of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. . . .”

Some of you will remember the time when parents gave their children names with the hope that those children might eventually grow into their names, that one day they would become persons who actually resembled the people for whom they were named.

So, children were often named after beloved members of the family, or dear friends of the parents, or great heros

of the Bible, or revered saints of the Church.

Children were named, not because parents liked the *sound* of the name, but because they liked the *meaning* of the name.

So, if a baby girl was given the name Mary, or Anna (Hannah), or Elizabeth, or Sarah, well, there was going to be a lot of growing up and into such a name.

And, if a baby boy was given the name Samuel, or John, or Peter, or Paul, well, he was going to have a lot of growing up and into his name as well.

I've never really understood why my parents gave me the name which I bear, except that my father enjoyed reading the comics on Sundays after church—one in particular.

I'm certain that there was never another "Dennis" in the family or among my parents' friends.

I'm also certain that, had my parents known the meaning of such a name as I bear, they surely would not have wanted me to grow into that name.

The name "Dennis," you may know, is derived from the Greek name "Dionysios."

And, in Greek mythology, Dionysios was the god of the grape harvest, that is, wine-making and wine, thus also making him the god of the *ritual madness and ecstatic dance* which frees his followers from self-conscious fear and care. In other words, to put it politely, Dionysios is the god of debauchery, and later, the Bacchanalian feasts of Rome.

Fortunately, the name was redeemed by Saint Denis, Bishop of Paris in the third century, who later was martyred and canonized. (There's even a Sts. Denis Parish on the south side around 83rd and St. Louis).

But in the Bible, when it comes to names, it's a different story. There, a name defines the whole direction of a person's entire life.

And often we see that a *new name* is given when someone is called to undertake a *new venture*.

A new name, for a new time, for a new life.

Abram becomes Abraham.

Sarai becomes Sarah.

Jacob becomes Israel.

Simon becomes Peter.

Saul becomes Paul.

The old life is left behind the person, while the new life lies ahead of that person.

So, throughout the ages, people have been given *new names* when they were baptized, demonstrating that, as Ephesians testifies, you have been taught “to put off your *old self*, which belongs to your former manner of life. . . and to put on the *new self*, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

“. . .You were washed,” the Colossians are told, “you were made holy (set apart), you were justified in *the name* of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Thus, in the beginning, at Holy Baptism, we are very much “Christened,” “Christed,” named the name of “Christ.”

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, ” Paul exhorts the Colossians, “*do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Good counsel for the beginning of the New year:

“ . . . Do everything in *the name* of the Lord Jesus. . . . ”

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we see that even God bears a variety of names, the most sacred of which is associated with God’s own “call” to graciousness, compassion, kindness.

When God, in the burning bush, revealed his secret name to Moses, a name so holy that it should never cross human lips, the circumstances speak completely of compassion: “I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt,” the LORD says to Moses, “and I have heard their

cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. I have come down to rescue them.”

This is God compassionate.

This is God as Savior.

A couple Sundays ago, when “the angel Gabriel (played by Aiden, I think) was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth” to announce Jesus’ conception, we heard that *his name* was not given by Mary and Joseph, but by the Most High, “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and *you will name him Jesus.*”

And that name, a shortened form of the Hebrew *Jehoshu'a*, or what we know as “Joshua,” that name means, as it did for the slaves in Egypt, that name means “the Lord saves,” or “the Lord helps.”

So, at *the beginning* of Israel's life in the promised land, Moses changes the name of *Hoshea son of Nunn* to *Jehoshu'a*, Joshua, then sends him and the others "to spy out the land."

So this name is given to Jesus at the *beginning* of his life in the Jewish Law when he is circumcised on the eighth day.

And, like Joshua, Jesus' ministry will *begin* at the Jordan River when he is baptized by John.

Today, more than most days, I suppose we think about *new beginnings*.

A new year stands before us, a new time, a new venture, a new land.

We haven't been here before.

God is calling us out of last into this new year.

So, we need to have *a new name, a new name* that defines the rest of our days.

“. . . Do everything in *the name* of the Lord Jesus. . . .”

I suppose there is within us a deep yearning for new beginnings, a natural hope that this year will be different than the last year.

So, we make our resolutions.

We seek a *new beginning*.

Earlier in that letter to the Colossians, the Apostle puts it very simply: “[Christ] is *the beginning*.”

During these days of Christmas, we have heard John’s Prologue sing, “*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in *the*

beginning with God.”

And John of Patmos hears the risen Christ announce that, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

On this New year’s Day, the readings are all about new beginnings.

God pronounces a blessing on the new priests as they begin their new way of life in the promised land: “The LORD bless you and keep you”

Centuries later, after prophets have risen and kingdoms have fallen, God makes yet a new beginning.

Yet another chance, and again, God has a new name. This time, it is Jesus.

An old way is ending; a new way is beginning.

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”

Of course, adoption is a another chance.

The Father of Jesus has adopted us, giving us his own name, a new beginning, a whole new life—everyday of this new year and everyday for the rest of our lives.

Because God is not finished with us.

God is yet raising Easter out of Good Friday.

And this is the power of God: beginnings follow what seem to be endings.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis recalls that “When I

was a child I often had [a] toothache, and I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something which would deaden the pain. . . .

“But I did not go to my mother—at least, not till the pain became very bad. And the reason I did not go was this. I did not doubt she would give me the aspirin; but I knew she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist the next morning.

“I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain; but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. And I knew those dentists; I knew they started fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth which had not yet begun to ache. They

would not let sleeping dogs lie; if you gave them an inch they took [a mile].

Now, if I may put it that way, our Lord is like the dentists. If you give Him an inch, He will take [a mile]. Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of. . . or which is obviously spoiling daily life Well, He will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked; but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment.”

Time and again, we hear the Bible tell us, “The LORD, the LORD (there’s that unspoken, holy name), the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. . . .”

Would that we bear *this name* at the beginning of *this new year*: “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. . . .”

So, here’s a word for the New Year:

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;

and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, *do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”