

First Reading: Numbers 6:22-27

²²*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,*
²⁴*The LORD bless you and keep you;*
²⁵*the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;*
²⁶*the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*
²⁷*So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.*

Gospel: Luke 2:15-21

¹⁵*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."* ¹⁶*So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.* ¹⁷*When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child;*
¹⁸*and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.* ¹⁹*But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.* ²⁰*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

²¹*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.*

Happy New Year! Today is the first day of the year 2023. Some of us have made new year's resolutions. Maybe you've already broken yours....I hope not. We make resolutions in order to try to be better versions of ourselves.

Today in the calendar of the church year, we celebrate the festival of the Name of Jesus. As you heard in the gospel I just read, the shepherds had gone to Bethlehem to see the amazing thing that the angels had told them and they found it to be exactly as it had been explained to them...they found the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. They were so amazed they told everyone what they had seen and heard. Mary treasured all these words and treasured them in her heart. We heard these words on Christmas Eve.

But this morning, we hear that eight days later, the baby born in Bethlehem is taken to be circumcised and he is named Jesus, the name given to him by the angel before he was even born.

You might remember that when Joseph learned that Mary was with child, he planned to be dismiss her quietly, as they were betrothed, but not yet married. But an angel appear to him in a dream and said, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child is from the Holy Spirit. You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

In the Hebrew the name Jesus means Yahweh saves. God saves. Jesus' name tells his purpose. Jesus will save God's people from their sins.

We know that so much good has been done in Jesus' name – the Scriptures tell us it is the name above every name – healing and blessing and transformation have all been done in Jesus' name. But, we also note with sadness, that terrible things have also been done in Jesus' name, not that they have been God's plan, judgement, persecution, war, and injustice.

I've sort of lost track of how many mission trips I've lead middle and high school students on, where we serve in Jesus' name. Everyone one of those trips has been a rewarding and surprising experience because of what happens as we serve others in Jesus' name. What is your congregation doing in Jesus' name? Do you host a food pantry? Or a preschool? Are you learning to love those who are different from you in Jesus' name? Are you speaking up on behalf of those who are often not heard in Jesus' name? Or do you serve others in some others way in Jesus' name?

Jesus was given his name before he was even born, he is not officially named until eight days after he is born when it was time for him to be circumcised. This Jewish custom was both practical and religious. At a time when infant and maternal mortality was very high, it made sense to delay naming, to be sure that the child would survive.

Religiously, name is tied to the covenantal relationship we have with God. Abram was renamed Abraham after God entered into relationship with him. The giving of a new name at the time of entering into a covenant was, can be for us, a sign of the new thing God is doing in and through us.

At the beginning of a new year, we might benefit from a new name. A new name might help define who we are or who we hope to be. My name is Daniel – which I'm told means “God is my judge” – but maybe I'd like to be called Everett which means brave because that's an identity I'd like to try on in this new year.

To give you an example of “new names” you might imagine for yourself, I want to share the words of a contemporary Christian song that's called “I Will Change Your Name.” You might want to look it up on Google. “I Will Change Your Name.” The words are meant to be the word of God speaking to us. They go like this:

I will change your name,
You shall no longer be called Wounded, Outcast, Lonely, or Afraid
I will change your name.
Your new name shall be Confidence, Joyfulness, Overcoming One.
Faithfulness, Friend of God, One who Seeks My Face.
I will change your name.

God sometimes decided that people needed a change in names and with it, an opportunity to live a new identity. Sarai became Sarah when she was to become the mother of a great many nations in her old age. Jacob became Israel after wrestling with God and being transformed. Paul became Saul. Simon becomes Peter, the Rock on which the Church is built. From creation, names have been given the highest importance. They are more than just words. They often convey a person's place and purpose in the world.

In the reading from Numbers we heard a beautiful blessing that Moses is supposed to instruct Aaron the priest, and his sons, to pass along to the people. What's happening in this portion of Numbers is that we are hearing a description of how the Hebrew people should prepare to leave Mt. Sinai and continue their journey through the wilderness in order to eventually reach the promised land. The blessing is to be repeated throughout what is a very difficult and incredibly long journey. The blessing is beautiful poetry and it is preceded and followed by language that reminds the people that they are set apart and made holy.

Listen to these words from Numbers:

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,
The Lord bless you and keep you,
The make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.
So shall they put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

It's a beautiful blessing. God is active in blessing and keeping and being gracious and giving peace. The you of "the Lord bless you and keep you" is singular. It's as if everyone of the Hebrew people – and every one of us now – should hear the personal and intimate nature of this blessing. The Lord is speaking to you and me. The Lord be gracious to you. The Lord give you peace.

But the conclusion of this beautiful blessing is also remarkable. "So, they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." God puts the Lord's name on God's people. God puts GOd's name on us. We are made in the image of God. In the waters of Holy Baptism, we are made children of God. But we also receive God's name. We the cross on our foreheads. We have sealed with Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. But we also wear the name of God. We can wear it and let it define us. We can wear it and let others see it.

What is God's name for you? Some of have carried the burden of names like not good enough, lost, lonely, alone, failure, problem. But God is in the business of changing names. Jesus died on the cross and rose to new life, new life that is ours here and now and for all eternity. God gives us new names here and now. Forgiven. Beloved. Children of God. Redeemed. Enough. Blessed.

God is giving you a new name. Claim it.

And may the Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

With wonder and thanksgiving for Christ's coming into the world, we pray for the church, the life of the earth, and the whole human family.

A brief silence.

Holy God, you have given the church the holy name of Jesus, and in him we are your beloved children. Unite us in mission through the power of his Spirit. Make us worthy of the name we bear, the name in which we pray. At the start of this new year, we ask for your blessing on the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, its congregations, synods, rostered ministers, members, and friends. We especially ask for an extra measure of your grace for our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth, and our Bishop, Bill. God of grace, hear our prayer.

Renewing God, restore your glory to the earth. Awaken humanity to our kinship with all living things that depend on your provision. Teach us to care for the earth and safeguard its treasures for those who come after us. God of grace,
hear our prayer.

Peacemaking God, reconcile the nations. Lead those in conflict into negotiation, especially in areas of religious or ethnic strife. We pray for those who face violence in Russia, Ukraine, and Mynmar. End acts of aggression and violence carried out in your name. God of grace,
hear our prayer.

Delivering God, rescue our siblings in any danger, especially in communities where disaster and disease threaten. Move those in authority to respond with speed and compassion. We pray for the safety of first responders, health care workers, and all who protect us. We remember our siblings in Kentucky who continue to recover from devastating tornadoes and floods. God of grace,
hear our prayer.

Healing God, raise up any who are bowed down with illness or sorrow. Deepen our care and concern for one another. We lift to you all who are undergoing transition in relationships, occupation, living situation, or health condition (*especially*). God of grace,
hear our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

Saving God, redeem us and grant us eternal peace. We give thanks for the faithful departed who now rest in your undying love, made known to us in Jesus our Emmanuel. God of grace,
hear our prayer.

Pondering the mystery of eternal love made flesh in Christ Jesus, we commend all for whom we pray to the mercy of God.

Amen.