

Sermon for The Holy Name of Our Lord
Year B January 1, 2006
St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
The Rev. Jeanne Finan

...and you will name him Jesus

The year is 1965.

I am a sophomore at Needham Broughton High School
in Raleigh, North Carolina.

At the time, I am more of a Joan Baez and Bob Dylan music fan,
tossed with a splash of Rolling Stones and the Beatles--
yet even so,

I can still remember the Shirley Ellis top hit of that year--

*Shirley Shirley Bo Birley Bonana Fanna fo Firley
Fee fy mo Mirley, Shirley!*

I am certain that there are at least a few of you here this morning
who remember that song-- *The Name Game*.

Quite a silly song really.

Yet, even when there are so many things
(important things) I can't seem to recall at all,
not even from a few days ago,

here it is, over forty years later,
and I can still sing *The Name Game*.

Jeanne Jeanne Bo Beanne, Bonana Fanna fo Feanne...

You get the picture.

I think it shows how fascinated we are with names,
with our own names,
with the names of others.

Names say something about who we are.

We realize there is something special about a name.

To be Jeanne spelled J-E-A-N-N-E

is to be a different sort than someone named J-E-A-N.

To be Spenser with an S-E-R at the end,

is to be different than Spencer with a C-E-R at the end.

Our daughter's name is Benares.

She is named after the holiest city in India where my husband traveled in his younger
days.

Shorten her name and call our daughter "Bernie" without her invitation,
and you will find your name is M-U-D (and not as in Roger).

When our son was born I wanted a double name for him--
affirmation of my Southern roots, I suppose--
you know-- John Boy, Billy Bob....I love those double names.

However, a compromise had to be struck with my Pennsylvania born, world-traveled husband...
We finally agreed on Jody-Taj.
Jody because it was friendly and Southern (but not too Southern).
And Taj because it means "Jewel"--and our son was and is a jewel, precious to us.
(Plus, there is that great guitarist and blues man Taj Mahal...
a worthy selling point for a non-Southern, music-loving husband)

We want to give our children names
that have the beauty and the power and the celebration of their heritage
that speaks to all we pray for them in the world.

Our name becomes part of who we are...
or is it we that become a part of our name?

This morning, January 1st, is the celebration of the Feast of the Holy Name.

This morning's gospel tells us it is eight days after the birth of this baby,
born to Mary and Joseph,
as all good and faithful Jewish parents know (both then and now),
it is time to have their son circumcised and to officially give him his name.

Circumcision, according to the law of Moses, is a sign of the ever-lasting covenant
between God and the people of Israel.

Through circumcision Jesus gains solidarity with his people,
with humanity.
(Circumcision will leave no doubt that the Word was made flesh!)

But Luke's gospel is more concerned with the naming of this child.

Names in scripture have great meaning as to what a person is called to do.
Mary and Joseph do not name their child.
He has already been named by God--
for remember, angels are messengers.

We already know this baby will be named Jesus.
When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he told her right up front...
*You will conceive in your womb and bear a son
and you will name him Jesus.* (Luke 1:31)

It is just as the angel said.
But this is the day that makes it official.

Jesus--this son of Mary and Joseph--is not the first to bear this name.
He is not the first--or last-- Jesus.
In fact, the name Jesus was a fairly common name given to young male babies in those days.

But it is important
that THIS particular baby has THIS particular name.

For the name Jesus,
translated from the Hebrew,
means *Savior* or *Deliverer*.

The Jews were waiting—waiting for some one whom God would send
to set them free from an oppressive Roman government

Just as God sent Moses to lead the Jews from slavery out of Egypt,
the Jews were waiting for the Messiah
to lead them to freedom once more.

And Jesus will do just that.
But not in the way that anyone expected.

Even today, we still want Jesus to behave in ways
we would like to prescribe ourselves.
We still want a superman God,
a Savior who never lets anything bad happen,
certainly not to good people,
a Jesus who will keep our Humpty Dumpty selves
from ever falling off the wall.

We have not made peace with our own brokenness,
and we assume that God has not made peace with our brokenness either.

2006 years later,
we still struggle to understand the fullness of what this name means—
Savior, Deliverer, Jesus the Christ.

As Christians, we certainly recognize that there is power in the name of Jesus.

We pray—
in the name of Jesus.

We ask things—
in the name of Jesus.

We offer our worldly goods—
in the name of Jesus.

Our dismissal from this worship is sometimes given,
calling us
to go forth into the world in the *name* of Christ.

But what does that mean?

This week in an e-mail letter received from Kale King,
a friend and the priest who served here in this parish as the interim
before Rick was called as the rector,

Kale wrote:

K *God's choice to give human beings free will was, from the
beginning,*

a decision to be helpless in human hands. With the birth of Jesus, God made the divine helplessness very clear to us, for a human infant is totally dependent on the loving response of other people. Our natural response to a baby is to open our arms...to the infant of Bethlehem and to the God who made us all.

Maybe the way we belong to Jesus,
maybe the way we really celebrate and live into that Holy Name,
is to make ourselves vulnerable,
more and more vulnerable--
to surrender,
to fully open our hearts,
as well as our arms --
to this baby named Jesus,
to God, to the whole world.

Risking vulnerability,
consciously choosing to open our hearts to the places, to the people,
we have closed off and away from us,
will not look the same for any one of us.

For some,
vulnerability means signing up to go on the DC Urban Mission trip or to Panama
or Mississippi or Louisiana.
Leaving the safety of our beautiful little town of Blowing Rock
and the comforts of our own homes,
is really trusting that God will lead us
to a new way of seeing Christ
in all persons--
even those who are so different than us--
(at least on the outside).

For some,
the risk might be signing up for a Foyers Group,
opening our hearts to other people right here in this parish,
That's right.
No more "in and out" to Church and quickly checking it off our Sunday "to do" list.
Jesus may be calling us to see Church as a community
and not just a building.

For some,
living into the name of Jesus this year
may mean cleaning up our own act.
With God's help, it is possible to turn our lives around,
to change (that's what the word repent really means).
Perhaps we need to risk apologizing to those who need to hear from us,
and to open ourselves to growing so we respect our own--and others'-- dignity.

For some,
committing to worship and Sunday School--
not just occasionally but every Sunday morning--
for some that is taking a risk that says,
yes, we really believe what happens here,

makes a difference
 in whom we are and how we live.
Perhaps we might risk meeting Jesus by coming to pray the Daily Office,
 or setting aside time to just be still,
 to sit quietly in God's presence.
Yes!! To sit still.
 Stop moving!! Stop doing!! Stop talking!! Stop being helpful!!
 Just stop, sit and listen
 for God's voice.
 Risk it.

As with Mary, there is much to treasure and ponder in our own hearts.

The year is 2006.

Exactly why or how or for what purpose the name of Jesus
 has been planted in your heart and in mine,
 cannot be fully understood.

We can only choose
 to open our hearts to this love that is offered,
 to risk our own vulnerability,
 To resist legislating the vulnerability of others,
 and to take love in our arms,
 to hold and embrace this baby named Jesus
 as if our lives depended upon it.

They do, you know.
 But probably not in any ways we really expect.
Savior. Deliverer. Messiah.
This baby named Jesus
 is full of surprises.

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