

A Sermon Preached at Trinity Episcopal Church  
Fort Worth, Texas  
Holy Name 2012

Happy New Year! I'm mighty proud of you for coming to church on New Year's Day in a year when the calendar has us all about two bubbles off plumb. And I'm also particularly happy to see you this day, since it's my first "official" day as . . . well, doorkeeper, I guess, until Trinity has a new rector, something your Succession Commission is working hard on.

I'm also particularly happy to see you this morning, because today we're doing something really rare in terms of our liturgical life. Today is the Feast of the Holy Name, the day Jesus got his name, one week after Christmas, and usually it's kept—if it's kept at all—at a weekday Mass with the celebrant and the altar guild and the Four Sainted Dames who go to weekday Mass.

But this time Christmas came on Sunday, something that happens only about every time the dragon flies, so this year instead of celebrating Christmas I, we get Holy Name today; and all over the world, liturgical churches like ours get the opportunity to pray and think about and respond to that moment in the Lord's life. The lessons are about naming—God blesses and thus marks his people, Jesus gets his name (almost in a footnote!), and Paul assures us that we are God's children and bear his name. In that light, then, I want us to spend some time this morning pondering Jesus' holy name, then names and naming in general, and I want us to think about God's notions about the names you and I bear, about the name he's given us, and what that means in the way we live the rest of this and every new year.

First, there's the name of Jesus. The story says that Gabriel revealed it to Mary at the Annunciation, so God evidently had some notions about the child the virgin would conceive and bear. He gets it exactly one week after his birth like the law requires, since the evangelists insisted he met every requirement to be messiah. And notice this about the name Jesus: it's mighty rare in the Bible. Hardly shows up anywhere else. I mean there are Samuels and Nathans and Jacobs and Johns and all the rest—but hardly another Jesus anywhere. There's Jesus ben Sirach in the apocrypha, but you just don't find many

Jesuses in the Bible. The angel also talked of some of God's notions about the child. Jesus would be great and bring great good to God's people, which is a considerable notion in itself—and about as much a glimpse of the Father's mind as we get.

Among us, here in Fort Worth today, the name of Jesus is certainly . . . well . . . holy. We know, we're taught at our mother's knees and everywhere else, that Jesus is something special, a name we don't use lightly. Or better not. I can tell you, when I was maybe ten, eleven years old and learning to express myself . . . colorfully? . . . I got slapped right away from the table at my Grandmother Coggin's house for using it flippantly. She was a Tennessee Methodist and not prepared to put up with a bit of that. Of course, in Mexico that didn't work. I mean there are men—and women—named *Jesús* all over the place. But it comes right home to you north of the border. I live over on the east side of town where a lot of people came from Mexico, and one day I was driving down Ayers to the grocery store and saw a sign in a yard: *House for sale. Dial 817 dit dot dit dot dit. Ask for Jesus.* Well, now! That'll catch your eye. At least around here, though a lot of us profane it, most folks have a very acute notion that Jesus is a holy name, a name set apart, connected straight with God. Don't mess with it.

How about our names, my name, your names? We don't get to choose them, you know, unless we do it as adults. Somebody else names us, and usually the names we get include notions, like God's notions about his son. I know my parents named me Bruce for my mother's first cousin who died horribly. Aunt Ada asked my mother to name her first son Bruce, so I got that. And I'm Wayne after my father. It didn't occur to me for decades that Bruce Wayne is Batman's name, for Pete's sake. My students in Mexico all called me *Doctor Batmán!* A little gift with my name fifty years in the coming. But from time to time, I recall the notions my name includes.

We don't get to choose our family names either, at least men don't ordinarily, and they carry a load too. Bishop Pope said his mother always cautioned him to “remember who you are” and by that meant the family's Good Name. There are times I wish he'd remembered it a little less! But you get the point. The family name has content. We say, “Oh, that's just the way those Ledbetters are!” or “That's just the Randolph in him.” Names have baggage.

What about naming? If you've ever named a child—even a pet—you know what I mean. When I was an undergraduate in Austin—I didn't go to this little four-year college across the street; you'll just have to forgive me—I had a friend with a girlfriend named Ginna. Ginna. I just loved that name, liked the way it sounded in my head, swore if I ever had a daughter, she'd be Ginna. As it turned out the mother of my children had a best friend named Virginia, so my daughter is Virginia for that friend and Kathryn for my mother-in-law—but to me she's Ginna. I had notions about her when she was tiny, and as often happens, they haven't exactly turned out. She's made her own life and has the usual woes and wonders, but she's still my Ginna and I love her so much I can hardly stand it, always will. Just say Ginna, and my heart fills up. My other kids' names are just as loaded.

It's also important that names be *right*. Sometimes things, even people, get the wrong name. I teach a Faulkner story in which a family has lived in the same great white plantation house for over a century, and the men heirs are named John and Bayard and John and Bayard from generation to generation until the last Bayard married a dadgummed Yankee carpetbagger girl whose maiden name was Benbow, and that woman named the heir to the place Benbow. *Benbow!* Everybody called him that except the ninety year old grande dame who lived in a wheelchair in the library, and she called him Johnny. She knew what his name *should* have been. In that connection I think of Abram and Sarai getting their names changed to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. Evidently it wouldn't do for them to have Arabic names, so they got retrofitted with proper Hebrew monikers.

Sometimes people reject their names. I teach another story, Flannery O'Connor, in which a mother, an optimistic woman named Hopewell, has notions about her daughter and names her Joy. Well, Joy grows up and goes to college and studies philosophy and learns that life is meaningless and horrible, so she goes to court and changes her name to Hulga. *Hulga!* The ugliest name she could think of. She knew who she thought she was. It was mighty hard on that mother, though. All her notions right out the window.

What about calling names? At times we use names as weapons. There are a good many names I'm familiar with that can get your teeth knocked down your throat if you use them wrong. Oh, we have many, many of those in our arsenal. Even my youngest

grandson Danny spots them. When he's at some family gathering, and one of the adults uses some vivid language, his eyes pop right open: "That's a ba-a-a-ad word!" Even little children know. Names are not just handles. They're complex engines of emotion and power.

Well, enough about the way we name. Let's think about God's notions about you and your name, because I think he's got some. I figure just about everybody in the house was baptized at some point in the past. Some of us can remember our baptisms. I remember mine. I was eight or nine and already had my names. Others were baptized as infants and, depending on where that happened, you got the Fred or the Mary or the George or the Linda you go by at the very least. If you were baptized Roman Catholic or in some fine High Church parish of ours, you also might have gotten a saint's name—St. Kentigern or St. Etheldreda or some other worthy—and that saint's day is your name day. The Freds and Marys are about your parents' notions, the saints' names about some priest's notions. Have you forgotten that, along with parents and ministers, you were ushered through those waters of baptism by none other than God? God parented you then just as much as any of the others, and God gave you a name too: Jesus. You are born, after all into Christ—let's call him Jesus—and you bear his sign and name the rest of your life and forever. Consider that. You're named Jesus.

Another thing from Mexico. People with the same name—two men named Juan, two women named María—have a word for each other: *tocayo*, *tocaya*. That way they avoid having to use their own names with each other. Well, every one of us is *tocayo* with Jesus, because that's our name too. Think of it. God has notions about you, and they are a whole lot like the notions he has about Jesus. God also knew that, unlike Jesus who alone ever fulfilled his heavenly father's notions entirely, you and I are not up to living into those notions a lot of the time. Children often don't meet their parents' cherished notions. You know. If you're anything like me, and I think you are, you drop the ball all the time. I sure do. That's why God gave us Jesus when he renamed us. He knew we'd need help.

Consider this about your Jesus name. One of the promises we make—and will repeat right here next Sunday—is to seek and serve Jesus in everyone we meet. That means serving ourselves in a way, and I know I find Christ in you and others all the time.

Maybe you don't need my service. Maybe we just need to recognize each other and strengthen and encourage. But when we see the needy, rejected, despised, outcast Jesus in others, we had best get cracking to fulfill those Matthew Twenty-Five notions—feed, clothe, comfort, love, all that. And what about people seeing Jesus in us? In you? Do your fellow Jesus *tocayos* recognize you as one of the family? Likely they do. I mean, you're here. But what about people who have heard of Jesus and don't like what they hear? What about people who have no notions about Jesus at all? Do they see something in you, your Jesus, that somehow stops them, makes them wonder, "Who is that who seems somehow . . . different, blessed?" Do I, do you, do we, does Trinity Church remember day in and day out that we who bear the name of Jesus are the light God's notions have set for the rest of the world? Do we bear that light? Each of us, all of us?

Well, those are some things to think about the rest of the year. You may be a little surprised to think of yourself as Jesus, but that's exactly God's notion about you and me and all God's chillen. We're all in that family the way God see us, his notion. Our job this day and every day is to remember who we are, whose name we claim, whose name saves us, and then to find ourselves, yourself, myself, in everybody we meet. I mean, God's notion is that we're all one blessed family. It's our destiny to pray and work to make that a living reality.

Happy New Year! Happy Name Day!

Amen.

