



Circumcision and Naming of Jesus Sunday, 1 January AD 2012

Luke 2:21-22

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And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

At Luke 1:31 Mary is told to name her son Jesus; and at Matthew 1:21 Joseph is also told to name the child, Jesus. A small thing, but imagine their surprise when they share their stories of angels, dreams and encounters with God. Both gospels converge at this point—naming Jesus. Joseph

and Mary will be encouraged when they find out that they have each had a similar experience. They have each been told who their child will be.

“What are we going to name to name new the baby?” As soon as anyone finds that she is pregnant, the next question has to do with gender, and following that is the name. Questions of gender and identity have everything to do with who we are, how we feel about ourselves, and how we are perceived and received by others. The name you give your child will have everything to do with the rest of its life. No pressure.

“Who am I? Who am I?” the man cries out. Is he Jean Valjean? Or, is he escaped convict 24601? That’s what the play will show us. Can a man escape the past? Can we really change? Can one be truly born again? To what length will Valjean go, or any man that matter, for a new chance at a new life? And, how absolute is God’s absolution? (The oblique reference is to the play, *LES MISERABLE*, and Val Jean the show’s protagonist, who goes by several other names in the play.)

So let’s get to the chief player in our own lives, ourselves. Its New Year’s Day, you’ve just been absolved; be it known that the words, the rather formal words, I spoke to you on behalf of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, are to be taken at face value. It is as if you are born again, your slate is clean, you can start over with the permission and encouragement of God. And, those of you who are Christians need to give each other the space to start over: *“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive*

those who trespass against us.”

It is easier said than done, but it is not for you to hold grudges regarding sins that God has pardoned. Remember Cain? He feared someone might avenge Abel's murder. God forgave him and promised that no one would kill him in retribution. From the beginning God shows himself to be merciful, God pardons our offenses. From the beginning, even before Able's death, God vowed in the presence of Satan that there would come an ultimate avenger, a redeemer for our parents, someone to set things right. One of Eve's children would bruise the head of Satan. With the prophecy of Genesis 3:15 the story of the Bible, our story, is set in motion.

William Shakespeare wrote “a rose by any name would smell as sweet.” Juliette spoke the line, the one thing she didn't like about Romeo was his last name. At his sentencing, pleading for the court to be merciful, former Illinois governor, Rod Blagojevic told to the judge that he was already punished, he would bear the shame of his crimes forever. His children now bear a sullied name. “It's not as though we are Smiths,” he said.

A name can be a terrible thing to overcome. Can you imagine being the child of a Benedict Arnold, or Dr. Samuel Mudd? Or what about someone's spouse, like Marina, the wife of Lee Harvey Oswald? There is a valid reason for the Eighth Commandment, prohibiting gossip and slander. “*You shall not bear a false witness against your neighbor.*” I was always told, “if you can't say anything good about someone, don't say anything at all.”

And in this context the name of Jesus is so all important. “*For he shall save (rescue/deliver) his people from their sins,*” the angel told Joseph. From the beginning Joseph held the key to the Child's identity. So does anyone reading the Gospel of Matthew.

- “*His people,*” the Child was to be a prince, a king.
- “*From their sins,*” or was he to be a priest or religious figure?
- Jesus' name in the original Hebrew (in case we've forgotten) means “God (the LORD) is salvation.”

Is there in English anywhere a name so meaningful, so heavy with significance for our own lives? I don't know of another. So many of our petitions end in Jesus' name—sometimes I think we use it almost without thinking. Yet, we have been told and given permission to use his name to ask for the godly things we need. To be clear, I would never ask in Jesus' name to hit the lottery, or for my football team to win the super bowl. But for what we need, our daily bread, we may and should

ask, remembering always the source of every blessing.

The name “Jesus,” St. Paul says that one day “every knee shall bend at the sound of it, and every tongue shall praise that name” (Philippians 2:9 ff.) It is the highest name in all of creation, God honors it, with his Son above all others, making the earth his footstool.

So I have one request to make of all of you. Let your resolution be to honor the name of Jesus in your speaking and doing. You can start by just trying to watch your tongue. Watch how you speak, especially when you are angry about something. Consider that others will notice your speech. (I have a walking friend with a very salty tongue. I think he’s noticed that my speech is a little more guarded and I may have to let him in on a secret one of these days.) But know that all we say and do honors or dishonors the most precious name of our Savior.

In his name we live. In his name we begin to live a new year.

Peace.

In some cultures this is not an issue; children are named after their grand-parents and favorite aunt and uncles. Children of people born outside the USA most often face that issue, it's a story I've heard a thousand times. My mother is from the generation that said, "No." Otherwise I might have been a Hugo, an Adolph or a Walter. A younger cousin got the Adolph as a middle name. I don't have one at all.

Names are important. Names may, in part, determine how well your child does in school, and what people think of your family—even before they meet us. A name that is too ethnic sounding may invite bullying or prejudice. To advance in the business world you best have a name that relatively easy to pronounce.

Jesus was named after a hero, Joshua, mighty warrior. He took over the leadership of Israel after the death of Moses.