

Feast of the Holy Name

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The Holy Name that Works

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I have strong feelings about my name—what I have been called by others, what I have chosen for myself, versions of my name that were kind and unkind.

When I was very little, I was called Barbie, at home, in the neighborhood, and at school. In fourth grade I very carefully wrote Barbie on all my school papers, then just as carefully crossed it out and rewrote, Barb. I knew what I wanted to be called. I had other nicknames as well, which the kids in the neighborhood gave me. I didn't like them. There is power in names to lift up, and power in names to tear down.

By college I had succeeded in being called Barb – that's what I prefer. A friend, who was angry with me at the time, pointed out the power of that name. Barb, you're like a tiny thorn in the skin, he said. By then it was too late to change it. And probably too late to change that aspect of myself as well.

Peter B Taub, a columnist at the newspaper I worked at just out of college, would have called that "A name that worked." Like Dr. Mitten, the hand surgeon. I was Barb, the thorn in one's side.

Jesus had a name like that.

It was given him by an angel before he was even conceived -- Joshua, or Yehoshuah, which means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh will save."

Jesus did what his name said.

Biblical names often have meanings like that. They work – they do the will of God, or help to keep the story moving along. Abraham's wife Sarah laughed when she was told by an angel that she would conceive in her old age. So she named the that son she ultimately gave birth to Isaac, which means "one who laughs" or "one who rejoices."

We celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus on the 8th day after Christmas, to mark Jesus' naming day, as we're reminded in the Gospel of Luke. It was also the day that he was circumcised, the physical sign that he was a member of God's chosen people. For a long time, the church remembered that aspect about him on January 1, which was the Feast of the Circumcision and the Octave of Christmas. But the 1979 Prayer Book changed it to the Feast of the Holy Name, which I think highlights the more important part of the ceremony. Names last well after the body gives out.

Jesus was given a name that works. God saves. And that's what he lived his life telling and showing people – that his Abba God was actively saving them by healing them, raising them from the dead, by including them, by stirring up their hearts and their faith with the Word, by standing with them, by dying for them. Jesus told the story so well, he was the story, he was the Name. Yahweh is salvation.

That's what it means to have a name that works.

The Apostle Paul felt strongly about the power of Jesus' name, how it revealed the divinity in Jesus. Paul called him Lord, not the small "l" lord that was reserved for important people like rabbis, teachers, Roman officials. No when Paul talked about Jesus, he used the big L Lord, that Israel reserved for God.

He wanted the communities that he founded to not only call Jesus the right name, but to do the work of that name. He wanted them to ride on the wave of that name that worked, and to follow where it took them, which Paul believed was right into the arms of God.

So we have this beautiful, poetic description of what the work of Jesus' name looks like, in the letter that Paul sent to the Philippians while he was imprisoned elsewhere. Now around here, if you're a Philippian, it means you once attended St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Oreland, which joined with St. Peter's five/six years ago. It's a short way of telling that story. Another name that works. But if you were a Philippian in the first century BCE, it meant that you were a member of an early Christian community in Philippi, which was in Macedonia, which mainly consisted of Greeks and Romans, a mixture of Jews and gentiles who followed Jewish practices. Paul wanted this community to work – to get along, to be followers and proclaimers of the Name of Jesus the Lord.

He gave them this poem as a way of describing how he hoped they would be: "be of the same mind," Paul writes by way of introduction, "having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was[a] in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he existed in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be grasped,

7 but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

assuming human likeness...'

It wasn't just the name of Jesus that Paul wanted his siblings in Philippi to remember, whether they called him Jesus or Lord with a capital L, it was the way that name worked on them – what it did. And what it did was pour itself out in service to the Divine will, it humbled itself, obeyed the will of God... This is what God the Word did when God was born as Jesus.

Jesus humbled the Divine self right into the dust of our lives so that we could find God and be found by God. And he rose, from dust, from death right into the divine life with humanity in tow. The action of Jesus all throughout the gospels is one of descending and ascending, following after us in our own falling, lifting us with his own rising.

If the name of Jesus is a name that works like that, Paul says that followers of Jesus must live out of the same pattern. Right after the passage that we have today, Paul says this to his friends in Philippi:

*Therefore, my beloved...work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

Work on your own salvation with fear and trembling! That doesn't mean that we save ourselves. But given how Paul has just described Jesus, it means that we join in that outpouring, that humbling and

that obedience along with Jesus. And rise with him. That's what it means to be exalted. To be lifted up. To rise.

According to Paul this is how such a community should act: it should offer comfort to one another; its members should love and console one another, and be partners; it should be tender in its affection and its sympathy. Paul wants the community he founded not to be full of descension and criticism and disagreement. Don't humiliate each other. But be humble and tender with one another, he is saying.

The bended knee is not a passive act – it is an act of humility that forms community where people serve one another, and acknowledge where power truly comes from. To confess that Jesus Christ is Lord is to live like Jesus. That is a pattern of descent and ascent. It is God's pattern, and it's to be ours as well if we are to truly follow Christ.

As we contemplate the power of the Holy Name that Works, one question we might ask ourselves is how are we called to descend and to ascend in this new year? Where are we called both as individuals and as a church to humble ourselves – to make a way in the dust and dirt of our humanity so that others can find their way to God? Let's go back to Paul's list: who needs our compassion, our forgiveness, or our apology? Whose life needs repair or reparation? Who is waiting to partner with us, to share in the labor of the Name that works? Whose gifts should we call forth, celebrate, coax or coach? What gifts are we called to put out there, into the work that awaits?

These are the questions that the owner of that Holy Name is asking us today. When he calls us by name, how shall we answer?

Amen.