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All Saints' Episcopal Church
Littleton, NH
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The Naming of Jesus

A couple of weeks ago, I asked Fr. Curtis if I could preach today. I needed a little help with an assignment for Deacon School in which I had to prepare a sermon and preach the Sunday after Christmas. I am grateful for his assistance and insight. Fr Curtis reminded me that this was Holy Name Sunday and I left church that day thinking about Shakespeare's quote in *Romeo and Juliet*, "What's in a name?"

Many years ago, when I was born, parents took their babies home without naming them first. When I was brought home from St Joseph's Hospital, I was simply the baby. Then began the arduous task of finding a name that my parents liked and that suited a 6 lbs. baby girl who was all pink and wrinkly. Names were tried on like hats. So, for the first 2 weeks, I was Mary Ann, Mary Ann Patricia, Patricia after my mother. That didn't stick. So then for the next 3 weeks I was Maureen Patricia. I can picture my parents running through the list of my brother's and sister's names to see if mine fit. Let's see Valerie, Billy, Donald and Maureen. No, that wouldn't work. So then, inspiration struck. It came while my mother was watching the soap opera *As the World Turns*. My name was to be Lisa Patricia.

My birth and my name were not significant. Ok, it was momentous for my parents and if I was Mary Ann or Maureen, it may have changed my personality and I may be a different person today.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare challenges us to weigh the importance of names when Juliet queried, "What's in a name?" Juliet's optimism that the families ill-will toward each other would not

overpower them was for naught and a rose is still called a rose. Perhaps, Juliet was right and names are immaterial, or perhaps she was so very wrong. My claim this morning is that names mean everything and every name has meaning.

Names are the placeholders in this world. A name is the first thing in this life that is truly yours, and it is worn like a well-loved possession. When meeting someone new, it is the first thing they know about you. “Hi I’m Lisa, nice to meet you.” Just your name can light a spark of recognition. When someone stands head and shoulders above the crowd, their name becomes synonymous with success and fame.

This morning, Holy Name Sunday, while we polish up our New Year’s resolutions, we are called back into the story of the Infant Jesus.

The angel Gabriel told Joseph to accept Mary as his wife and call the child of the Holy Spirit, Yeshua, or God saves us. This tiny infant will be known far and wide as Immanuel, the Messiah, the Savior and Lord but he is to be called, Yeshua.

His birth took place in the meager surroundings of a stable in Bethlehem. The newborn infant was gently placed in an animal’s feeding trough filled with hay for comfort, he was wrapped in cloth for warmth, surrounded by the love of his parents and more than a few farm animals. He is worshipped by both king and pauper and his birth has opened the door on a brand-new world.

He is circumcised at 8 days old in accordance with Jewish religious tradition. Newborn mortality rates were so high that if the child lived for 8 days, then chances were good that he would survive. It is there that, in fulfillment of the Word of God, the child is given his chosen name. It is in tradition and rites that the Jewish people find their past and their promise.

On the day he is presented in the temple, Jesus was named Yeshua or God saves us from sins. Mary and Joseph most likely spoke Aramaic.

Yeshua in Aramaic is Joshua in Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. The gospels are written in Greek so Yeshua becomes Iesous (Esous) and then becomes Jesus.

Names were important in the Old Testament. Right at the start in the book of Genesis, Adam is told by God to give names to all of the things he has created, every animal, plant, and fish. Having a name is to create a sense of uniqueness, separating one variety from another. For example, even though there are many Marys in the world, you are unique among Marys. Your name makes you, you.

At the burning bush, Moses asked God to name himself. He asked who will I say sent me? God responded with a name that couldn't be defined in human terms. He answered Moses, I am who I am. Tell the people that I am sent you. There are no boundaries around God and he cannot be limited by human knowledge. We are far too limited to clearly say who God is.

Jesus, as an adult, refers to himself as the Son of Man, explaining his humanity and the Son of God proclaiming his divinity. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?" They respond, "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks, who do you say that I am? Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." The Son of the Living God. Another way of describing Jesus' relationship with his father. Another identity, and yet another way to define Jesus to his followers. And what a wonderful way to see God. The Living God.

This morning, Philippians tells us that, "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Fr Curtis explained to me that when we pray to God in the name of Jesus, we are not reciting a magical incantation. When we pray this

way, we are being invited into all that Jesus is. Our intercessor, our Savior, our Lord.

So, what's in a name? All names have meanings. Perhaps you were named for a grandparent, or best friend or in my case a soap opera character. In the Bible, names can define relationships or have faith filled meanings. They are chosen by parents out of love for the child. Names are gifts that we receive at birth and most times use throughout our whole lives and then they are immortalized in death. Names are powerful tools in shaping our identity.

Sometimes names are long, difficult to spell and pronounce. Yet, the name of Jesus is so simple and so influential. To the faithful invoking the name of Jesus is not to be taken lightly. It is a mighty name preserved in song and story and prayer and praise for thousands of years. At our baptism, we are joined as one with Jesus and we adopt his story.

In closing, on this Holy Name Sunday, we think back to when Mary and Joseph first gazed upon the child, presented in the temple, begotten not made by God and of one being with the Father and called him Jesus.