

“The Holy Name of Jesus”

Numbers 6:22-27 • Psalm 8 • Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11 • Luke 2:15-21

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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The First Sunday of Christmas

I discovered some buried treasure a few years ago and have been waiting for a good opportunity to share it with you. Specifically, I have been waiting for *today*, the first time New Year’s Day has fallen on a Sunday since I made the find. But it has nothing to do with New Year’s Day!

One of the things I have been trying to do in recent years is gain a better understanding of what the different branches of the Christian Church have in common, and where they differ. I’ve told you before that the lectionary we use – that’s the series of readings from scripture, Sunday after Sunday – is identical or nearly identical to that used by a variety of churches belonging to other denominations, both here in our country and in numerous other countries as well, including Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Episcopal, Reformed, American Baptist, and Disciples of Christ, to name just a few. The fact that it’s not *exactly* the same in all these traditions has aroused my curiosity and led to some investigating. It turns out that *some* branches of the Church have a celebration on January 1 every year that has nothing to do with the new year. It’s called “the Holy Name of Jesus.”

Now we all know that the Christian calendar re-tells the story of Jesus’ life every single year. The big events, of course, are Christmas, commemorating Christ’s birth, and Easter, commemorating Christ’s resurrection, but there’s also Epiphany, the Baptism of the Lord, the Transfiguration, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Ascension Day, and Pentecost, all of which mark, in sequence, specific events that happen in the Gospels and the early part of the Book of Acts. Every one of those that I just mentioned is part of our “official” Presbyterian Church calendar. But some Christian traditions add one more event from the life of Jesus to that list: the day when the infant Jesus was circumcised and officially *named*. Luke describes it like this: “When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” (Luke 2:21) Count the days. We do not know what day Jesus was born – the Gospels do not tell us that – but ever since the fourth century we have commemorated the event on December 25. So if we say that December 25 is the 1st day of Christ’s life on earth, and December 26th is the 2nd, December 27th is the 3rd, the 28th is the 4th; the 29th is the 5th; the 30th is the 6th, and the 31st is the 7th. That means that January 1 is the 8th day of Christ’s life. “When the *eighth day* came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus.” On January 1, Jesus is *circumcised*, and *named*.

Why did that happen on the *eighth day* of his life? Because that’s what the Jewish law said. In the book of Genesis, when God establishes the covenant with Abraham, God says: “Every male among you shall be circumcised.... Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is *eight days old*....” (Genesis 17:10-12) Faithful Jewish families followed that law. Not before, not after, but precisely on the day when the child is *eight days old*. To this day, circumcision on the

eighth day is a tremendously important ceremony for baby Jewish boys and their families.

The circumcision of Jesus became an annual celebration in the Church in the Middle Ages. There are many depictions of it in art, and important theology as well – for that is the first known time when the blood of Christ was shed, thus beginning the process of our redemption. That blood also bore witness to Christ’s full humanity. There are a lot more details here, which I’m not going to go into. A number of branches of Christianity still commemorate the circumcision of Christ annually.

Let’s turn now to the *second* thing that happened on that day: the *naming* of Jesus. There is not a mandate in the Old Testament saying that baby boys should be named on the same day they are circumcised, but this appears to have become a common practice by the time of Jesus, and remains to this day the predominant custom among Jews. From ancient times there has been a practice of holding a festive, celebratory meal following a baby boy’s circumcision, at which time the baby would formally be given his name. Luke doesn’t mention a meal, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. What’s more important is the *name* that was bestowed upon the child: “he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” (Luke 2:21) Mary had been told to name the child “Jesus” by the angel Gabriel – “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus” (Luke 1:31) – and Joseph also had been told by the angel who visited him that “you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21) The name “Jesus” comes from the Greek name “Iesous,” which is comprised of the letters iota, eta, sigma, omicron, upsilon, and sigma (ΙΗΣΟΥΣ). That is commonly abbreviated with just the first two and the last letters, iota, eta, and sigma, like this: ΙΗΣ, or transliterated into English, like this: IHS. You can often find that abbreviation on crosses, like the one we have up here in the chancel. When I was a kid I thought IHS was an abbreviation that stood for “In His Service.” That was my best guess – no one ever explained it to me!

That’s his Greek name. In Hebrew he would have been called “Yehoshua.” “Yehoshua” is typically translated into English as “Joshua,” like the Joshua who fought the battle of Jericho. Jesus in the New Testament and Joshua in the Old Testament had *exactly* the same name. It literally means, “The LORD is salvation.” Jesus’ *name* articulates what Jesus will *do*: he will *save* people from their sins.

The annual commemoration of the naming of Jesus dates back to the 1400s; it is not as old as the commemoration of his circumcision. But one could argue it should be of greater importance, for scripture repeatedly speaks of the *power* of Jesus’ name. Paul writes, “*at the name* given to Jesus every knee should 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.” (Phil. 2:10-11) Quoting from the prophet Joel, he says, “Everyone who calls *on the name* of the Lord shall be saved.” (Romans 10:13) Jesus, in John’s gospel, says, “Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father *in my name*, he will give it to you.” (John 16:23) On the day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowds, “Repent and be baptized every one of you *in the name* of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38) To the lame man, he said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; *in the name* of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” (Acts 3:6) In Philippi, Paul commanded a spirit to come out of a serving girl with the words, “I order you *in the name* of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” (Acts 16:18) In Mark’s gospel, someone is seen casting out demons in Jesus’ name. (Mark 9:38-39) The *name of Jesus* has *power*. You may not realize this, but every time you end a prayer with the words, “*in the name of Jesus*,” you are invoking the *power* of his name. If Peter can make a lame man walk with that name, if Paul can cast out a spirits with that name, if some unknown person can cast out demons with that name – what *else* can that name do? What could *you* do with that name?

So I find it oddly surprising that the Holy Name of Jesus does not make it into the official

Presbyterian calendar. It's in the Roman Catholic calendar, and the Episcopal calendar, and the Lutheran calendar. The United Methodists added it to their calendar in 2009. But it's not in our calendar, and I don't understand why. It's certainly biblical; there's no question about that. The Protestant Reformers threw out a lot of church traditions that didn't have biblical basis, but this shouldn't have been one of them. The Episcopalians and the Lutherans kept it. Why didn't we? I guess I'm going to have to keep investigating. But in the meantime, let's remember that it's not just the *name* of Jesus that has meaning and significance. He also has a lot of *titles*. Briefly, they include:

Christ: This is a title, not a name. I explained this to the children who attend our Wednesday program last month, and one of the kids' eyes got wide as saucers: "Wait – you mean *Jesus Christ* isn't his *name*?" Nope. *Jesus* is his name. The word "Christ" is a title for someone who has been *anointed*, the way priests were in the Old Testament (and some prophets and kings). Specifically, it refers to the *Messiah*, God's promised Anointed One. "Jesus Christ" is another way of saying "Jesus the Messiah."

Lord: from the earliest days following Christ's resurrection, Christians have affirmed that Jesus is our Lord, or Master. In Greek, the word is *Kyrios*, as in "Kyrie eleison" ("Lord, have mercy").

Emmanuel means "God is with us;" that comes from the prophesy about a child in Isaiah 7:14.

Word of God: that's the divine *Logos*, the pre-existent Word which called creation into being.

Son of God: this refers to the divinity of Jesus, and his unique relationship with God Almighty.

Son of Man: this refers to his humanity, and to his final coming, as prophesied in Daniel 7.

Son of David: this title reminds us of Jesus's physical descent from King David, of his rightful claim to David's throne, and to the promises God made about David's everlasting kingdom.

Lamb of God: Jesus is the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sin of the world, and whose death replaces the whole system of animal sacrifices that God instructed the ancient Israelites to observe.

The second Adam: as Paul explains in his letter to the Romans, the first Adam, through his sin, brought condemnation to all. Jesus is the second Adam, who brings justification and life for all.

Light of the World: Jesus the source of all goodness, and brings an end to all darkness.

King of the Jews: a title given to Jesus by Gentiles, sometimes in jest. Jesus was a Jew. He did not rule on earth and did not look much like a king, but in eternity he rules over all earthly kings.

Rabbi: A Jewish teacher or master, worthy of respect; one whose teachings are to be followed.

The list goes on. King of kings and Lord of lords. Savior. The Chosen One. The Nazarene, referring to the fact that he came from Nazareth. The Bread of Life, referring both to his teachings and to communion. The Great High Priest, our great mediator and intercessor with God. A prophet, like the great prophets of old. The Alpha and Omega – the first and last, the beginning and end. (Rev. 22:13) The very last title for Jesus in the New Testament is this: the "bright morning star." (Rev. 22:16)

So Jesus has one holy name – *with power!* – and a great many titles. On January 1, it's worth taking a few minutes to remember and celebrate his name, and ponder its meaning. Jesus does *exactly* what his name says he does: he *saves*. Truly, the Lord *is* our salvation. So let us go to Bethlehem one last time this Christmas, with the wise men, to give praise and honor to our Savior. *Thanks be to God!*

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