

## I. Naming

The practice of 'naming' has come up several times this month. As I prepare to be ordained to the Priesthood, people are asking how I hope to be addressed – how to name me in this new role, Mother, Father, Pastor, Sarah... My Aunt Teresa, who is Roman Catholic, emailed asking, "...when we speak to you, do we call you Reverend? or do we call you Ma'am? It can't possibly be 'father", nor "Mother", I think.... Shephherdess?" What to call me – a female, soon-to-be-ordained priest in the apostolic tradition – seems the latest puzzle.

Then there's naming of years, to which a friend of mine recently introduced me. She spends time each December reflecting on major events and movements of the prior year and she felt about them, where God was present, etc. Then she uses these reflections to help her imagine a new vision for the New calendar Year, such as "year of the \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_." Paul and I started doing this, as of this year: hoping for more stability and a slower pace in 2011, we're calling next year "Year of the Turtle." (He even has a little walk for it.)

And then there's naming people, most often babies before they leave the hospital or in our faith tradition, naming at baptism (giving someone a "Christian name"). People choose names by popularity, favorite people in history, and of course, Biblical names with hopes that the name will in some way relate to the child's

identity. One of my friends received a wonderful Christmas gift this year: on Christmas Eve she had a baby girl.

A couple days prior, she wrote on her FaceBook page, "Today ONLY - taking votes on what to name little girl." After a lengthy exchanges and comments online, she went with "Noelle C." When I asked her about the initial "C," my friend explained that when her daughter enters womanhood, she will choose her own middle name. Both the ritual of naming her Noelle and giving her an initial so she can add her middle name are significant to shaping her identity, or at least that's the hope.

Naming: naming people, experiences, our relationships is an important, global ritual. Fr Dan gave another example of this a couple weeks ago when he preached about Jesus' family tree and the bigger picture we get from a list of names. Names matter; they help us tell the stories of our lives – about our histories and about our hopeful futures.

## II. Feast of the ...

Today is Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. It used to be called Feast of the Circumcision, being the 8<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas or 8<sup>th</sup> day following Jesus' birth when he would have been circumcised in the Temple and... named!

Circumcision was a ritual of recommitting oneself to be a covenanted people with God, based upon God's promise to Abraham retold in Gen 17(10-14). With any ritual, there's debate about what's really happening – does the wine really become blood, will a person go to heaven if he's only sprinkled versus immersed in water. This “Covenant of Circumcision” ceremony, as it's translated, was deeply influenced by the mysticism of Kabbalah in Jewish history, bringing together physical action with Divine mystery or an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

The service is actually three parts – the circumcision, the official naming, and a ritual meal. The second part, naming, has a long and rich biblical history, as exemplified in the same exchange between God and Abraham:

Gen 17. <sup>4</sup>As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be Abram,<sup>\*</sup> but your name shall be Abraham;<sup>\*</sup> for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of

you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring<sup>\*</sup> after you. In his Covenant of Circumcision, Jesus would have been so named according to this covenant tradition and specifically as the angel instructed: *Joshua*, meaning “savior” or “deliverer” in Hebrew.

There's much to be said about the relationship between circumcision and baptism, the spotlight on males versus females, or even the horrors of female circumcision today, but I invite you this New Year's Day to focus on the importance of ‘naming.’ The long genealogy list in Matthew 1 leads to up to this in verse 21, “She will bear a son, and you [Joseph] are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” And here we arrive back at our re-titled Feast day.

It was important that Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth each had experiences confirming about Jesus' birth and identity. The role of community in discerning and affirming moved this prophecy beyond individual delusion to a faith-filled expectation. So, when it came time to naming this baby boy, even though a dove had yet to descend upon his head and a voice cry out from heaven to validate him, even though he'd yet to perform miracles, even though he was many years off from talking about his relationship with God as Father, they believed. In faith and with hope for the future, they named him Jesus.

### III. Name of 'Jesus'

I've had the great misfortune of seeing the movie *Talladega Nights*, but one worthwhile scene is when the family gathers around the dinner table and prays before eating. The main character begins, "Dear 8 pound, 6\_ ounce, newborn infant *Jesus*, don't even know a word yet." This humorous address raises a wonderful question about our image and understanding of Jesus. Jesus is more than a baby processed around the church on Christmas Eve or sent on pictures of Christmas cards.... Right?!

The Church through history has understood salvation largely as 'spiritual salvation' – most popularly, Jesus' saving us from hell by becoming an atoning sacrifice through his death or a ransom paid for our sins. Alternately, Julian of Norwich said, "Jesus is the one who not only helped the servant out of the pit, but let him know that he would be rewarded for his efforts, not punished for his mistakes." E. M. Broner wrote in *A Weave of Women* (1978) ,

...freedom comes not as a result of God's activity but of God's presence: when women tell the story of God's saving power, what we hear is not that God has fought for them, but simply that God is with them. Redemption is no longer a matter of supernatural intervention in the world, nor of divine deeds of great power, but of divine presence in the midst of human struggle, and divine partnership in the work of redemption.

All of this – and more – is tied up in the name “Jesus.”

Names help us frame our past and envision the future. Naming is important in knowing what to call someone or something. As we move into the New Year, with New Year's Resolutions and setting goals, spend some time reflecting on ‘naming’ – naming people you have lost and those with whom you look forward to spending time, naming the possible good things and challenging moments you anticipate in the new year, and naming how this is connected to and informed by your Faith.

Going into this year, also take time to explore and expand your understanding of Jesus who is the Holy One Incarnate, the promised “Savior and Deliverer:”

- What images come to mind when you hear the name “Jesus”?
- What do we mean by praying “in Jesus’ name”?
- What does Jesus as “savior” and “deliverer” mean to you?