

Numbers 6:22-27  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Luke 2:15-21  
Psalm 8

At the end of this past week, I had an opportunity to take my first Uber ride. Have any of you tried Uber yet? The genius behind Uber is phenomenal. I needed a ride into Washington, so I downloaded this app on my phone, punched in the address that I need to get to and I got an estimate of the amount of money the ride would cost me and also how many Uber drivers were located near me. Much to my surprise, there were 8 Uber drivers within 2 blocks of the church. My wait time for my ride was less than 3 minutes. That's pretty phenomenal. I was really fascinated with this process, so I started to ask questions of my driver. He was a muslim from Sierra Leone and he's been driving for Uber for about 2 years. Before that he drove a cab for 29 years. I asked him about the differences in the two experiences and he was more than happy to tell me how much better it was to be an Uber driver than to be a cabbie! Before too long, I felt like I was getting to know him, so I asked him his name. It was Say-yule Kamina. Now, if I wanted to, I could call him by name.....which I did when we reached my destination and I got out of his car. I wished him Happy New Year and I called him by name. That's the first time I've ever called a driver by his name. It felt different.....more like something I would do with a friend or an acquaintance rather than someone who is essentially a total stranger and someone I will probably never see again.

It occurred to me to wonder about this whole business of calling people by name. All of us do it when we can and there seems to me to be a difference in the interaction between two people when they have shared their names with each other. There's something very personal about calling someone by name. And when we meet someone for the first time, it's one of the first things we want to know about them. What is your name? What should I call you? A name is an identifier. It is one way that we can distinguish one person from another. Sometimes we need to add a qualifier.....like the initial of a last name.....maybe Sally K. to distinguish her from Sally B.

So knowing someone's name is one of the building blocks of building a relationship. Calling someone by name is to legitimize them in some way.....to make them real.....to acknowledge them. It is respectful, usually, and it implies a certain basic understanding between two people about the worth of each of them. It is where we start in getting to know someone.

Today, this Sunday, January 1, 2017, we are celebrating the Feast of the Holy Name. This day falls eight days after our celebration of the birth of Jesus and in the Jewish tradition the eighth day is the day that a male child is circumcised and given his name. Since Mary and Joseph were very faithful Jews, they took Jesus to the temple to have him circumcised and to officially name him. Before he was conceived, the angel Gabriel had told Mary that she would have a son and she was instructed to name him Jesus because that name means 'God saves.' Joseph also was told by an angel that Mary's child was a boy and that when he was born he was to be called Jesus. The naming of a child is very important.....even to this day. And the naming of the child is the prerogative of the newborn's parents. In this case, the child in question was named by his parent.....and that parent was God. Mary and Joseph were simply carrying out the instructions they had been given by God's messenger. In the Jewish tradition there is some crossover between mothers naming their newborns and fathers taking that role. For Joseph to have stepped forward and given 'Jesus' as the name for Mary's newborn son was tantamount to Joseph adopting Jesus. In naming him at this ceremony of circumcision, Joseph was claiming Jesus as his own and assuming responsibility for him as a father. And both he and Mary knew, that Jesus' real father, God, had already named him.....and the name was Jesus.

The names we bear say something about us. They are in some respects a prophecy about what a person will become. Many cultures see the assigning of a name to an infant as setting them on a path that they will fulfill as their life unfolds. At the end of their life journey, they may be asked at the final judgment if they have lived up to their name.

Names in the Bible, particularly, have definite meaning. God created the world we know by speaking things into existence. He named them. "Let there be light.....and there was light. And God saw that it was good." God created the first human from a lump of dirt and his name was Adam.....which in Hebrew means 'earth.' God then gave Adam the task of assigning names to all the animals that God created. This language of names then made it possible for people to refer to the same thing when speaking of a person, an animal, or a thing. The name is important.

Early on in the Bible, we learn that names can change according to circumstance. For example, Abram was the one to whom God provided descendants as plentiful as the stars in the sky.....even in his old age. And when Abram realized that he was dealing with the one true God..... when he embraced monotheism.....God changed his name from Abram to Abraham which means "the father of a multitude." Because of the change in his status and his importance in history as the father of many nations, God changed his name from Abram to Abraham. The same was true for his wife, Sarai who gave Abraham a son in her old age. God changed her name from Sarai to Sarah which means "princess" because God has said that kings

of peoples shall come from her. For both, the change in identity required a change in identification.

The same was true for Jacob whose name means 'heel.' It was an appropriate name for him because he faced all of life's problems by fleeing rather than fighting. When the chips were down and he had no choice, he wrestled all night long with a man beside the Jabbok River. As dawn broke and Jacob had not been subdued, he demanded to know the man's name. But he wasn't told the name. He received a blessing instead and a new name, too. His name became Israel because he had wrestled with God and with man and he had prevailed. A traumatic lifestyle change requires a new descriptor.

But Jacob had not asked for a new name. Jacob had asked for his opponent's name, but received a blessing instead. So what about this idea of a blessing? What does that mean that Abraham and Sarah and Jacob....and many other characters in the Bible..... all received a blessing from God? And many of us have received blessings from God and have prayed for such blessings as well.

So as we start the new year, we may be thinking about what we would like for ourselves.....what blessings in life would we like to have given to us in the new year. There is quite a lot of speculation these days about something known as the Prosperity Gospel. The message of this gospel is along the lines of.....the good things that happen in your life are blessings from God. That was what people believed in the days when Jesus walked the earth.....people believed that the more wealth a person had, the more God favored them.....that the healthier someone was the more God had blessed them.....the more children they had the more God loved them. To buy into this sort of thinking requires that a person also accepts the opposite.....people in poverty have not been blessed by God.....people in poor health do not have God's favor.....people without children are not loved by God. None of us would accept the converse as true because we know that Jesus said specifically, that the people who were suffering in this life were "blessed."

As we begin this new year, let's stop and think for a minute what it means to be blessed by God. It's not about having our wishes granted. God is not Santa Claus on a large scale. To be blessed by God is for God to have taken action that is directed toward us and results in a closer walk with God and an intimacy with God that no material gain could ever match. Being spiritually inhabited by the Triune God, which is what a blessing is, holds for us the deep peace that only God can provide. God's blessing on us means that God inhabits us.....that God is always with us.....that the power of God will direct our going out and our coming in and all aspects of our life. The blessing of God means that every breath we take and every thought we

have is accompanied by God's presence. Our material circumstances have nothing to do with God's blessing. Actually, when we are physically comfortable and secure in our sense of safety, it's really hard for us to take in God's blessings. We are too caught up in our own sense of self sufficiency to even realize that what God is offering us in a blessing far surpasses anything we could provide for ourselves.

So on this day of the Feast of the Holy Name.....and at the beginning of a new year.....we honor and celebrate the Holy Name of Jesus. We acknowledge both our dependence on God and our deep gratitude to God for his Son, Jesus. It was he who entered into the world for the sole purpose of revealing God to us and providing a way for us to be reconciled to God and be able to receive the blessings that God offers us. Jesus, though God's Son, humbled himself to become human like us, to live in poverty himself, to minister to those that the rest of the world believed God had NOT blessed and blessed both them and us. And because of Jesus, whose name means "God saves" we are indeed reconciled to God as only God can do. God took the initiative in sending his Son, Jesus to us. Because of the great gift of His Son, God is available to us and blesses us continuously. At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.