

**The Holy Name of Jesus**  
**January 1, 2012**  
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Shakespeare raises the question that, today, is also raised by the title of this celebration: The Holy Name of Jesus". Juliet says: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Well, it turns out that names actually DO matter.

Names are fascinating things! And Biblical names even more so. I've always been fascinated, for instance, in the passage at the beginning of Matthew's gospel where Isaiah 7:14 is quoted about a virgin bearing a son "and they shall name him Emmanuel" (1:23) but then, when Matthew's baby is born, Mary and Joseph don't call him 'Emmanuel" they call him Jesus! I've often wondered if they didn't pay any attention!! "Well, the angel said "Emmanuel" but I like Jesus"!!

The confusion is in the phrase "he shall be called..." We assume that it means "you'll name this child..." as in, this is their given name. Actually "Emmanuel" is more like a title – one of many, in fact. As Matthew, quoting Isaiah, says Emmanuel means "God with us", and it falls into the same category as other titles we hear in Isaiah: "God-with-us, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (9:6). Later Jesus gets another title: Messiah, from the Hebrew "Mashiah", which means "The Anointed One" – in Greek that's "Christos" – "Christ" is not a family name but a title, like the other titles I just mentioned; "Jesus Christ" means "Jesus the Anointed One".

So this child has many titles, but only one name: Jesus.

Today we're reflecting on that name. We're doing so because the old name for this celebration – the circumcision of Christ – really doesn't capture what's significant about the event for us.

It WAS significant for Jews – in Judaism it was and is traditional, 8 days after the birth of a boy, that a physical ritual is conducted - circumcision. On that day the boy is given a sacred name. The modern name for the ceremony is the “Bris”, from the Hebrew “Brit”, meaning covenant. And that’s what its all about.

That physical action today holds no meaning for us, but the naming connected to it does.

So how do you name the Son of God? We think that he was given a unique name: Jesus – or more accurately Jeshua/Joshua, which was the original Hebrew from which the Greek “Jesus” came. But actually “Jesus” was a very common name – the 1st Century equivalent of “Bob”! Nothing there to make him stand out from other Jewish boys.

“Jesus” is in Hebrew “Joshua”, or “Yeshua” and it means “Yahweh is our Salvation”.

Naming for Jews wasn’t a casual thing – in fact if you look at the first creation story in Genesis, that’s what God did: he named things: “God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas”

There’s a twist in that story, of course: God waits to see what the First Human will name the animals. Beginning in Genesis there’s a sense of collaborative purpose in naming that continues through the Old Testament as, occasionally, God intervenes to specify the name of a child for a particular reason.

Matthew explains that this child is named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1.21). So for Matthew the name of the child is telling us something about his future: what he will do and, in particular who he is – that there is a divine presence in this child.

The same with some slight variation applies in Luke’s Gospel.

There's nothing especially unusual in the name – in fact part of the point was to say that Jesus – Joshua – really didn't stand out. His name – along with his circumcision on the eighth day – was, in part, intended to speak of his normalness, his full humanity, the fact that, apparently, the first 30 years of his life were so unremarkable that they went, well, unremarked: he lived and worked with his family in Nazareth.

But, we can say, since hindsight is often 20/20, that there while there's nothing unusual there is something special in this name. For one thing, a name was believed to represent the essence of a person's character. “Yahweh is our salvation”, or more colloquially, “God Saves”.

The lovely reading from Numbers acts as a commentary on what it means that Jesus bears God's name. We know the words of the blessing “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace”, but the final words of that blessing aren't included in the version we hear: “So I shall put my name on the Israelites and bless them.”

God's name imparts God's blessing. We who bear the name of Jesus today — Jesus now revealed to be the Son of God and bearing the Messianic name “Christ” — are blessed in him. In Jesus Christ, the “name that is above every name” Paul reminds the Philippians and us in today's Epistle(2:9), we the Christian community encounter the gracious face of God in an unsurpassable way.

“How does God save? “Being "in the form of God”, Paul said – a paraphrase of “God Saves” – Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped or exploited, as something to be held onto at all costs and used to his own advantage. Rather, he willingly “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he

humbled himself and became obedient to the point to death -- even death on a cross.” (2:6-8).

Paul here makes the astonishing claim that the one we call God and Lord is most fully revealed in the crucified one. The one who humbled himself and took the form of a slave shows us who God is and how God acts. God's essential character is shown to be one of self-emptying love rather than self-aggrandizement or grasping for power and glory. God's high exaltation of Jesus confirms the divine nature of his mission and ensures that one day he will be acknowledged by all for who he truly is. Jesus, the one who saves, is God's anointed one.

And, Paul says, to the Philippians AND to us: "Let the same mind be in you..." We bear his name: to be Christians is literally to be Children of the Anointed One. On this day – and, really, every day – Jesus Name invites us to ask ourselves (to paraphrase Paul “How does God save? “Being "in the form of God”, Paul said – a paraphrase of “God Saves” –

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and, really, every day – Jesus Name invites us to ask ourselves (to paraphrase Paul) “do we have “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus”? Are we looking to the interests of others rather than our own interests? Are humility and servanthood evident among us?

There’s a lot to a name, despite Shakespeare’s comment. Does ours fit? Amen.