

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “The Name Above Every Name”

January 1, 2012

Happy New Year—I can’t think of a better way to begin this year than by worshipping with you this morning at Christ Church ☺.

For many of us January 1 is about recovering from New Year’s Eve or watching football or perhaps getting a jump on New Year’s resolutions. But January 1 is also a special day on the church calendar, the day we remember the Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament law stipulated that on the eighth day after a son’s birth he was to be circumcised and named (Leviticus 12:3); and that is exactly what happened with Jesus, as we see in today’s gospel reading from Luke: “After eight days had passed, 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).

Names carry a lot of meaning for people. Parents often spend hours discussing names for their unborn children. Some families make great efforts to carry on the family name by naming sons after their fathers, daughters after their mothers, etc. The black sheep in the family are often rebuked for marring the “family name.”

It’s interesting to me how some names tend to be more popular in certain generations. It seemed like my parents had many friends named Barbara or Tom. As a kid in elementary school I remember each year having multiple kids named Kevin or Kelly or Jennifer. When my kids were younger I coached a lot of different soccer teams and there were many kids named Haley or Bailey or Kelsey.

It is not uncommon for celebrities to change their names, especially music stars. Reginald Kenneth Dwight changed his name to Elton John and Alecia Moore changed her name to Pink. Some celebrities give their children rather interesting names, but I think the names Frank Zappa and his wife Gail gave their three kids take the cake: Moon Unit, Dweezil, and Diva Muffin ☺.

Sometimes people change their names for more painful reasons. I know someone who was so devastated by her past that she changed her name to Nemo, which is Latin for “nobody.”

When people of influence know our names it feels good. I remember in fifth grade one of the “it” guys in the grade above me was named Walter Goldsby. Walter was hilarious, good looking, really smart, and a gifted athlete. All the girls had a crush on Walter and all the guys wished they were Walter. To this day I remember walking down the hall in a line with my fifth grade class on the way to P.E. and passing Walter who was walking the opposite direction. He actually nodded at me, “What’s up, Dave?” as he passed by. My astonished classmates looked at me. “You know him?” one asked. So I lied, “Oh yeah, we hang out all the time.” It felt great to know Walter knew my name.

And it doesn’t stop in elementary school does it? All through life people appreciate it when people know their name, especially people of influence. Some like to brag about this—at many a cocktail party I’ve listened to people with finely honed skills in the art of name-dropping ☺.

A couple years ago I was volunteering at a PACEM (People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry) dinner over at Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church and had a long conversation with another volunteer, a retired school nurse. It turned out she had been the school nurse at the elementary school I attended from second through sixth grade. What are the odds of that? So we took a trip down memory lane and talked about various teachers and students. I asked her if she remembered Mrs. Cole and Mrs. Stephens and Miss. Powell—“Yes, yes, and yes” she responded. I asked her if she remembered Walter Goldsby. “Oh yes, I remember Walter,” she said, “He was so cute, and popular too.” I asked her if she remembered Nicole Salvadore or Kelly Gibson. “Of course,” she said, “and obviously you remember them too.” “Yeah, I had a crush on both of them,” I smiled. Then I asked her if she remembered me. Without hesitation she grinned, “Oh no, not at all, sorry” ☺.

Fortunately, even if others do not remember our names, God always does.

In fact, the Bible tells us that God knows us each by name. In the Old Testament God spoke these comforting words through the prophet Isaiah: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; *I have called you by name*, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1). In the New Testament Jesus said, “The shepherd of the sheep... *calls his own sheep by*

name and leads them out...I am the good shepherd...I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:3 and 14).

In the Bible we see that the name of God is to be treated with honor and respect. The third of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (Exodus 20:7). Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, *hallowed be Thy name...*” (Matthew 6:9). And yet this God whose name is holy knows each of us by name.

And in the Bible it’s not just the name of God that’s significant; the names of people also possess a deep significance, and often reveal the personality and destiny of the person.

Sometimes when God did a new work in someone’s life their name was changed accordingly.

In the Old Testament when God made a covenant with Abram, which means “exalted father,” he changed his name to Abraham, which means “father of multitudes” (Genesis 17:1-5).

In the New Testament when Simon confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus changed his name: “Blessed are you Simon Son of Jonah...I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:15-18).

But God does more than change our names. *He places his name on us.* In the Book of Numbers, which I’m sure all of you have read recently ☺, God gave to Moses the following blessing for the priests to proclaim to the people of Israel:

“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. *So they shall put my name on the Israelites,* and I will bless them” (Numbers 6:22-27).

On January 1 we remember the Holy Name of Jesus Christ because his name carries more significance than any other name. The name of Jesus is indeed, as Paul put it in his Letter to the Philippians, “the name that is above every name” (2:9).

The name Jesus reveals the Son of God's personality and destiny. As you remember, when Joseph had found out that Mary was pregnant he had resolved to end their relationship quietly, but an angel appeared to him in a dream and not only told him that the child in her womb was from the Holy Spirit but also what he was to be named. Traditionally the father would name the child, and so the angel said to Joseph, "*You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:21).

The name Jesus means "Savior," and indeed reveals who he is, the Savior of the world, and what he would do for us through his death and resurrection: save us—as Jesus told Nicodemus on the rooftop, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him" (John 3:17).

Throughout John's account of the gospel we see emphasis on believing, or trusting, in the name of Jesus for our salvation. In the first chapter John wrote, "(Jesus) came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, *who believed in his name*, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:10-12). Similarly, toward the end he also wrote that his account of the gospel was "written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that *through believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:31).

In the fall of 1996 I attended a youth ministry convention in St. Louis. One of the featured speakers was an author named Brennan Manning, whose classic book, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, I had recently read. Being the Type-A twenty-something I was back then, I got there early, got a good seat, and was prepared to take copious notes. About five minutes into his teaching tears were running down my face and all over my notebook, so I decided to just listen. Brennan had a way of speaking about the love of God revealed in Jesus in way that went straight to my heart, and when that happened, the tears just start flowing.

I recently found out that Brennan's health is failing, and last week I read his recently published final book, *All is Grace*, an honest memoir about how he has experienced the love of God in Jesus Christ in the midst of "the good, the bad, and the ugly" of his life. Listen to what he says about God's name:

“God’s name is Mercy; or in the present vernacular of my life—*Help*... Nowadays if I want to put on my jeans and shirt, someone has to help me. If I want to eat a slice of pepperoni pizza or an ice cream cone, someone has to help me. If I have to go to the bathroom, I need help. To turn up the volume of the Yankees game, I need help. To access my medicine or open my Diet Coke, I must have help. To get into bed at night, help. To rise in the morning, help. To nap in the afternoon, help. To write this book, help... These are days of prayer without ceasing—‘Help me! Have mercy on me!’ And my (Heavenly) Father, who is so very fond of me, does” (188).

God’s name is Mercy. His name is Grace. His name is Love.

And God is not only very fond of Brennan Manning, he is very fond of you too.

And out of that love he suffered and died to save you.

At his hometown of Nazareth Jesus was scorned and ridiculed, called hurtful names like Son of Mary rather than the traditional Son of Joseph, because he was considered illegitimate (Mark 6:3), and people wanted him to know that.

On Palm Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem to the adoration and adulation of the crowd that shouted, “Blessed is he who comes *in the name* of the Lord!” (Mark 11:9). Some of the same crowd that only five days later shouted, “Crucify him!”

At his sham trial the religious leaders called Jesus a blasphemer. As he was beaten the soldiers mocked him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” As he suffered on the cross passersby jokingly pointed at the one people called the King of Israel.

And yet it was on the cross that God fulfilled once and for all the priestly blessing He gave to Moses.

“The Lord bless you and keep you”—as Jesus died for you, you were blessed, and given God’s favor, and God will keep you forever.

“The Lord make his face to shine upon you”—as God turned his face away from Jesus on the cross at the moment Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” he turned his face toward you and made his face to shine upon you. And guess what? His face is still shining.

“(The Lord) be gracious to you”—in his death on the cross Jesus received no grace from anyone, and yet it was the ultimate demonstration of God’s grace, God’s one-way love, toward you.

“The Lord lift up his countenance upon you”—to lift up one’s countenance means to smile—as Jesus was lifted up on the cross God smiled upon you. And guess what? He is still smiling on you.

“(The Lord) give you peace”—as the Prince of Peace died on the cross, God forgave you all your sins, each and every one, so that you could have peace with God.

All this is to say that when Jesus died on the cross, he placed his name on you, so that you would be forever blessed.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus was true to His name. His name means “Savior,” and he indeed saved us through his death and resurrection; and because Jesus was true to his Name, our names are written in the book of life (Philippians 4:3).

So what about you on this New Year’s Day?

Regardless of whatever resolutions you have made, and whether or not you’re able to keep them, the good news of the gospel is that God has made a resolution to love you all the time, no matter what. And God always keeps His resolutions.

The good news of the gospel is that God is very fond of you. He remembers your name, calls you by name, and places his Name upon you so that you will be forever blessed.

In response, we are simply called to believe and bend the knee at “the name that is above every name.”

Amen.