

Christmas I –

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ 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.

“And he was called Jesus.” In the name...

Happy New Year! I will not be talking about New Year’s resolutions today. I have a couple, but I’m not going to talk about it. The reason is this: today is a double-duty Sunday in other ways as well! Not only is it the Lord’s Day—the name given to every Sunday in which the resurrection is celebrated through Word and Sacrament. Not only is it that, but it’s the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, or what is also called the Holy Name. I’ve never preached the Feast of the Holy Name, so now is my chance.

Let me begin with an illustration before we dig into this story from Luke. When we were first married, I drove a white Honda Accord. If you have seen one you’ve seen a million, right? I’d walk out into a parking lot at the mall, and inevitably sixteen of my cars would be in front of me. Needless to say, I learned to memorize the geography of my parking choices, since the car was so indistinguishable. My first point: I never named that car.

Well, I received quite an offer on that car a few months later, and sold it without a moment’s thought. For I had found one of my several dream cars. A friend had kept a classic 1980 Subaru GL wagon 4WD (in mint condition I might add), which was the kind of sick Midtown funky car that I loved, and he was willing to sell (my next car would be a Vanagon). I worshipped the car, and so did everyone else. It was one in a million. I would add custom features for no good reason. I would take it off-roading on my way home from Starbucks. So precious was the car to me that I NAMED IT. Boaz the Buru.

So with a silly car as my first example, my first point is this: I did not name Areta Child Unit #1. I did not name Honor Child Unit #2. I gave them names! To Areta, I gave a name from the Greek in Philippians 4: virtue or excellence. To Honor, I gave a name from the Latin found in countless passages in our New Testament: Honor. Honor means honor in Latin. And though I think both names are beautiful names, it wasn’t merely the sound of the name that sold me. It was the meaning behind it. I wanted the name to not only give human dignity above and beyond Child Unit #2; I

wanted the name to identify character and identity above and beyond a label. Your children and mine are not merely Homo Sapiens #7,000,000,462. Her name is Areta. She is a God-imagined immortal soul with very particular qualities.

Names matter. Names give identity that goes beyond a mere label, sound, and look. And according to Paul, there is a name above every other name. He identifies that as Jesus, and says that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow. Which is why.....among other reasons, you see me bow within the liturgy when the name of Jesus is uttered. It's a physical reminder every week of the exalted nature of Jesus.

Our story begins before Jesus is ever born, says Luke. Before shepherds were greeted with flaming spirits of fire known as angels. Before the chilling voices of beings from another realm filled the sky with other-worldly song. Before the Holy Spirit overshadowed the womb of a young unmarried virgin in her mid-teens known as the Blessed Virgin Mary. Before any of the story we've honored this week began to physically unfold, there was a name. Chosen. And yes, the name itself is important, but not because it happens to, when translated into English, have an 'e' that follows 'j'; an 's' that follows an 'e' and so on. The reason Jesus is significant *as a name* is because in Hebrew that name is Joshua. The Savior of Israel in the early Old Testament. Jesus is a greater Joshua. Jesus is a better Joshua. Jesus is a mightier Joshua.

But the significance of a name goes even deeper. It penetrates down to the very essence of His being. In the Scriptures, your name is who you are. It is the essence of your identity, and your word, and your personhood, and your permanence. You move from not-fully-human to fully-human when you are named.

So what if a being named 'Jesus' happens to not only be a 1st-century Jewish carpenter living in Palestine, but also happens to be the Son of God? Well, then the name of Jesus is synonymous with the following: glory as of the only begotten. That's what Jesus *is*, and therefore it is the essence of his name. What else? The love that moves the very sun and stars. That's what Jesus *is*, and therefore it is the essence of his name. What else? The voice of truth that is as mighty as a thousand rushing waters. That's what Jesus *is*, and therefore it is the essence of his name. How about one more: the beauty of whole oceans that are crystallized or frozen like glass or ice (a scene from Revelation). That's what Jesus *is*, and therefore it is the essence of his name. Jesus is glory. Jesus is love. Jesus is truth. Jesus is beautiful.

Today is the day when an older adoptive peasant carpenter named Joseph took his wife and new mother to the priest to be circumcised in simple obedience to the commandment of God. His flesh was marked as 'set apart' in the traditional Jewish fashion, but far more importantly, the name that is above every other name was bestowed upon him.

At this altar, we do not come to an unnamed figment of your priest's imagination; we come to God the Son who was enfleshed in a human womb, carried to term

during the Pax Romana, born to a peasant woman in a shepherding village, dedicated to God on January 1st, which happened to be 8 days after his birth, and whose name is Jesus. At his name Kingdoms shall rise and fall. At his name, martyrs, prophets, and apostles have been called forth to take his love to the nations. At his name, young children bow their heads and ask for Jesus to help them through their day. At his name, we are given body and blood which sustain unto eternal life that can be found in him alone.

In the name...