



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
1-1-17

You may have picked up the word “Name” several times in our readings for today is the actual Feast of the Holy Name. It is always celebrated on January 1st which doesn’t come around very often on a Sunday. But here it is and here we are with some time to reflect on Holy Names.

I find it hard to pick a name for someone – whether it was one of newly born children or a new pet. How do we know which name will be a good fit? How do we pick a name we will like to repeat over and over for lots and lots of years? What ties/bonds/significance do we wish to tie into the name? But we all finally do it – and then we adapt, add, create nicknames, play with the given names until they seem to match the personality and person being named.

And that is what happened with the naming of Jesus. By itself, literally in Hebrew – Jesus is Yeshua – or Joshua – a fairly common name then and today. But Yeshua is close to Yeshuva which is a name for God. And our Jesus becomes Jesus Son of Joseph, Jesus Son of God, Jesus the Nazarene, Jesus from Galilee, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the savior. Sometime he is called the Lord and so is God. So what is the importance of the name? What does a name give to us?

Recently I watched Tim Burton’s movie “Through the Looking Glass” which is the Alice in Wonderland story told about Alice returning to wonderland when she is 19 years old. As soon as Alice arrives back in wonderland all of the creatures about her keep asking if she is the “right” Alice. And then they discuss whether she could be the “right” Alice. She tells them over and over that she is Alice, but they continue to ask her – “Who Are You?” Who are you? They want an answer that tells them that she is their savior, their hero who has arrived to slay the deadly Jabberwock monster. She keeps denying that she is that Alice until the approach of the Jabberwock is imminent. Then, Alice gives them an answer about Who She Is. She tells them her full name, the name of the her parents and sister, where she lives, how old she is.....As she tells her answer she comes to realize her heritage, her identity, and the gifts she has been given. She realizes that she can be and is a woman of courage and adventure. She dons some armour and goes forth to slay the Jabberwock. Then she returns home and claims her full identity, throwing off the demands and expectations of the others around her as to how she should live her life. She instead becomes an intrepid business person continuing to have new adventures in the world.

For Alice, taking the time to answer “Who Are You?” clarified her identity, helped her locate herself thus freeing her to live honestly and authentically in the world. I believe that is valuable and important. We recognize and call on our roots to give us a foundation. We know that ground from which we come.

But Jesus was asked that same question over and over during his lifetime. “Tell us plainly, who are you?” Strangely to me, he always refused to provide the straightforward answer. I wonder why he didn’t? Perhaps it was because no name could fully capture who he was and is. Perhaps the people asking him for his identity were trying to place boundaries around him. Perhaps no name or easy answer was possible to explain Jesus. For I have counted and there are over 100 names of God in the Bible. Some of those names – like Yeshua or Lord also are used for Jesus – it is very hard to separate the two of them. In Galatians God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts so we might call out Abba, Father! That would be God. That would be Jesus. Emmanuel – God with us – that would be Jesus, that would be God. Wonderful Counselor- that would be God, that would be Jesus. And so on – 100 names expressing the gifts and wonder of our God and Jesus. And the ground from which he comes is all of creation so that all of the names become Holy Names.

And let’s go a little further with that. The Numbers reading has the Lord telling Moses that God’s name will be put on the Israelites and God will bless them. God’s name given to the people. Or listen to these verses from Isaiah Chapter 43: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned.” Fear not for I have redeemed you – I have called you by name – you are mine.

The identity of a Holy Name is our identity with God – we are God’s own, called and known by God. The same was true for Jesus – all names are Holy when called by God.

Thanks be to God.