





Happy New Year, St Anne's!

“What is your name?” It’s a basic question we ask whenever we meet someone for the first time. “Hi, my name is [Joe]. What’s yours?” we say. But have you ever asked yourself this question? What is my name? “Well no, you might say. That’s ridiculous. Of course I know what my name is. Why would I ask myself such a strange question?” But while you surely know your name at a basic level, it is remarkable how few people truly know the history, the background, of their name. What is your name? In other words, why do you have the name you do? Are you named after someone perhaps? Who is this person? What were/are they like? Why were you named after them? Who decided this?

Or perhaps you weren’t named after a particular person but were given your name because someone—a parent perhaps—liked its meaning or even its sound. So that begs the question, do you know what your name means? What language it comes from? And why out of all the possible names that could have been given to you were you given a name with that particular meaning? Does the meaning of your name signify some important quality about you, or by contrast have you crafted a life perhaps in defiance of what your name signifies?

I wonder, for example, about people with names like “Tristan,” which comes from a Welsh word meaning “sad” or “sorrowful.” What were Tristan’s parents thinking?, I wonder. Are the Tristans of the world a particularly gloomy group, or do some Tristans deliberately develop a cheerful disposition to spite their parents and resist the resonances of their birth name? But how about you? What does your name mean? Does it fit who you are? Or would you rather have a different name?

Today, January 1st, is the Church’s Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. We begin the new year just like we begin any new conversation: by focusing on names. “What is your name?” we ask someone when meeting them for the first time. “What is Jesus’ Name?,” we ask ourselves today as we begin 2023, as we start our commemoration of the feast days of the church for yet another calendar year.

Now obviously we know that Jesus’ Name is “Jesus,” but we devote an entire feast day to this Name in order to pause and reflect on this Name—not just the mere letters and sounds, but going deeper to ponder the meaning of this name and perhaps even further to consider its mysterious authority and power. “In Jesus’ Name,” we pray, after we ask God for all the things we need...but why do we say this? What does it mean to pray “in Jesus’ Name”? What does this phrase signify, and why is it featured so prominently in our tradition’s prayers?

As some of you may know, I’ve devoted the better part of the last

four years to studying the Name of Jesus for my doctoral dissertation, and particularly examining how early Christians invoked Jesus' Name out of a conviction that it was a very special name, a name connected to otherworldly power, the kind of power that could heal the sick, expel demons, and give new life to the dead. Knowing of my deep interest and substantial research into this topic, Rev. Garrett asked me to preach this morning on Jesus' holy name. And I assured him that I would not simply read ad nauseum from the bland pages of my arcane dissertation, which I am sure would be quite a sour way for us all to begin this new year. Rather, I'd like to focus this morning simply on the meaning of Jesus' Name. What does "Jesus" mean? What does this holy name signify? And what relevance might the meaning of Jesus' name have for us today on the first day of 2023?

First of all, it is important to note that the name "Jesus" was assigned to this baby by none other than God himself. The Gospel of Luke clearly states that neither Mary nor Joseph came up with this name, but rather the angel Gabriel, speaking on behalf of God, told Mary to name her baby "Jesus." Now this detail definitely raises the stakes: if the baby's name was assigned not by his parents but by God himself, then surely this is not some random name but instead must have been given in order to convey something fundamentally important about this little boy. And so, knowing that the name "Jesus" comes straight from God, we are now ready to consider its meaning.

"Jesus" comes from the Hebrew name "Joshua" or "Yeshua," which is based on two Hebrew words: "Ye-" (which refers to YHWH, "God") and "-shua" (which means "to save" or "salvation"). So putting the two parts together, we get "YHWH saves" or "YHWH is salvation." Now this etymology gets us a little distance but still raises more questions than it answers. "Okay, YHWH saves"—but saves who from what? When? Where? It's great that "Jesus" means "YHWH saves," but...so what? What difference does that make on January 1, 2023?

Let's explore this question from a different angle. There are things we can be saved from, and there are things we can be saved for. On the one hand, those things we wish we could be saved from: those aspects of life which pull each of us down: fears, doubts, insecurities, bad habits, anxieties about health or finances or family members or the future... all those troublesome dimensions which can make our life feel like we're trying to drive forward with the parking brake still engaged, aspects that limit our life's fullness, freedom, and joy... If these are the things we'd like to be saved from, there are other, more positive experiences which we'd like our lives to be saved for, or we could say, devoted to: living lives of greater connection with our friends, family, and God, lives of greater peace and joy, lives that

reflect our highest ideals and deepest values.

On this first day of the New Year, January 1, 2023, the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, the Feast of the Holy Name of “YHWH saves” what do you personally want to be saved from and saved for in the year to come? What would you like your life to be free of, on the one hand, this year? And on the other, what would you like your life to be devoted to?

The name of Jesus is essentially a promise, a promise of otherworldly power capable of saving us both from and for, starting today. In the early Church, this divine Name was invoked to heal the sick and raise the dead: serious situations which could not be navigated with merely human know-how and mundane, earthly tools. What serious situations do you need the supernatural power of Jesus’ name for today? Where do you need God’s otherworldly saving power in your life right now?

In the evangelical Bible church in which I grew up, we would sometimes sing a very simple but powerful song about Jesus’ Name entitled “Praise the Name of Jesus.” The lyrics were quite brief and straightforward, just a few lines which read:

Praise the Name of Jesus; Praise the Name of Jesus  
He’s my rock; He’s my fortress  
He’s my deliverer; In him will I trust  
Praise the Name of Jesus.

Simple words belying a profound—and very countercultural—way to live. We naturally do not like the idea of someone else being our deliverer, or entrusting our lives to another. We’re smart, we’re capable, and by golly, we live in New England. That’s all well and good for the superficial, mundane matters of life like holding down a job and paying our taxes on time, but if we’re truly honest with ourselves, we’re really not as in control of life as we’d like to imagine. There are those troublesome habits in our life’s dark corners; there are those existential fears about the unknown, about sickness, perhaps even death. We can successfully control only a very thin sliver of our lives, but so much remains uncertain, beyond our grasp, vulnerable to forces of change and decay over which we literally have no say. And so, truth be told, we really could use a rock, a fortress, and a deliverer, a Jesus whose powerful, supernatural name promises the hope of salvation—being saved from all that seeks to undermine the fullness of our lives, being saved for the lives of deep meaning, peace, and joy for which we were made in the first place.

So on this first day of the year, this New Year’s Day 2023, let us reacquaint ourselves with the holy name of Jesus. He already knows

our names, but do we really know his? If we want to be in conversation with Jesus this year, if we want to live and to pray “in Jesus’ name,” then a natural first step would be to grow familiar with this “Jesus” whom we so often invoke. What might “Jesus”—“YHWH saves”—mean for your life today and in the year to come? How might “Jesus”—“God is salvation”—offer you salvation from and salvation for?

Sometimes it can feel intimidating to think about approaching Jesus or striking up a conversation with this ethereal, supernatural figure: “What should I say?” we wonder. “What if I stumble over my words or, worse yet, say something inappropriate?” “Where do I even begin to try to talk with God?” Let’s not worry about any of that; let’s not get ahead of ourselves. After all, it’s only January 1st, the feast of Jesus’ Holy Name, the opening lines of this year’s conversation. So like any initial conversation, let’s just begin with names. What could Jesus’ Name mean for you today? Where could your life use some supernatural, saving power? Invite Jesus into that part of your life today, letting him be your rock, your fortress, your deliverer, as in him you put your trust, praising Jesus’ Holy Name.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.



