



SAINT LUKE'S

NAMING GOD

THE FEAST OF THE HOLY NAME

ISAIAH 52:7-10

HEBREWS 1:1-4,(5-12)

JOHN 1:1-14

PSALM 98

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Twenty four years ago, back when I was pregnant with my son, Aidan, my husband and I spent hours pouring over baby name books, trying to choose a name for our first child. We had made an agreement beforehand that each of us had absolute veto over any name - no questions asked. We both felt strongly that this agreement would keep either of us from trying to “convince” the other into choosing something they didn’t want. If one or the other of us said, “No, that just doesn’t work for me,” then that was it, no pleading or persuasion or rationales were allowed.

So there we sat, one of us reading through the long list of names. Each time a name was read, one or the other (or both of us) would say, “no,” or “no, that’s a beat me up at lunch name,” or sometimes even, “no freaking way!” It was fun, and I remember that we laughed a lot.

Reading the Gospel text, it’s clear that Mary and Joseph probably didn’t go through this process ~ Jesus’ name was already proposed to Mary before he was conceived. In Luke’s story, the angel Gabriel suggests to Mary what the child’s name will be as one part of the larger proposal asking for her assent to be the *theotokos*. Mary not only chooses to be the god-bearer, but she does indeed also choose to name her child Jesus.

Naming someone is a powerful thing ~ it is an action that calls us into relationship. Furthermore, to address someone by first name is to admit their specificity ~ their uniqueness ~ their singularity. It is very different than using a title or an office or even a family name. It implies a level of intimacy, of familiarity. To use someone’s name is to acknowledge that the other has an existence and that their existence has an affect on us, that a

relationship exists. It is an action which implies mutual responsibility – an action which implies recognition of indebtedness to the other.

In Luke's account, Jesus is circumcised and named on the 8th day after his birth ~ fulfilling the first of three requirements under Mosaic law for the birth of a male child. Luke is careful to tie Jesus to his Davidic roots for many reasons, not the least of which is that it connects Jesus to the Hebrew scriptures. In the contours and details of the Mary story, Luke specifically points us to *another* story of a woman, an angel, a child and a naming – the one from Genesis. Luke wants us to know that the story of the Annunciation, and the subsequent story of Mary naming Jesus, is indebted to, and in direct conversation with, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. In both instances, a woman meets an angel who tells her that she has (or will conceive) and suggests what to name her child.

Biblical commentators recognize that the story of Hagar in the wilderness is at the center of a chiasm. A chiasm is a literary motif in which ideas are presented in a certain order, and then presented again, with slight changes, in the opposite order. Whatever is at the center of such a structure is considered the heart of the story. So the Hagar story, the story of one of the most marginalized people, is incredibly important in the Genesis narrative.

Why would this be? Scholars think that Hagar's story – an indeed the larger narrative of Abraham and Sarah and God's promise to them all – was written during the Babylonian Exile – a time of utter desolation for the Judean people. The Hagar portion – the story of an enslaved woman who is told to return to bondage under Abraham and Sarah so that God may

“greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for the multitude” (Genesis 16:10) was seen as a sign of the eternal covenant God made with the Israelite people – *a covenant that would never be broken, no matter what they did*. Here is the most lowly person – an enslaved woman – presented as one of the central figures of God’s promise to Israel, as central even as Abraham and Sarah.

But the story of Hagar has a further twist that is especially relevant to the Feast of Holy Name today – she is the only person in the Hebrew Bible to “name” God. Listen to Genesis 16:13:

“So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’”

It is not coincidental that Hagar – the lowliest person in the narrative – has the most agency. She alone names God. In doing so, she acknowledges and claims humans ability to co-create with God. Those who listened to Luke’s Gospel *would have known this*.

So Mary’s story in Luke – that of the Annunciation, the Magnificat, and the naming of Jesus – is in direct conversation with the Hagar’s story. Once again, the most marginalized person, an unwed woman of lowly birth, is given the power to co-create with God: Mary *chooses* to bear God’s son. Mary chooses to name the child Jesus, or “God saves”. This Jesus, this savior, chose to be one of us. And he comes to us through the agency of the least among us. This is a God who is not remote from us – he is an inbreaking presence in our lives. He is the holy other that we can touch and see and feel.

Christian theologian Karl Rahner writes: “...Jesus as a proper name tells us *how* (God) willed to be in our regard: close, loving, helpful, faithful to the end. In Jesus and by him we know what we have in God. (...) He is the Word of the father, in whom as the word of mercy God expresses (God’s) self to the world.”

God is with us. And the saving presence of God can be found among the lowliest. Which is good news for all of us – for at some point, each of us *will be* the lowliest. No matter where we go – no matter who we are – no matter what we do – we are beloved by God. For as Rahner says: “This is how God wills to be in our regard: close, loving, helpful, and faithful to the end.” Our help *is* in the very name of the Lord – *God saves*.

We hear that echoed in the Christ hymn from the Paul’s letter to the Philippians:

9

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

10

so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11

and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

As we move forward into this New Year, let us keep this loving name in our minds, on our lips and in our hearts. Let us remember how God wills to be towards us, and that God desires us to be the same towards others: close, loving, helpful and faithful to the end.

Amen

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