

“O! be some other name.” This is what Juliet Capulet says to Romeo Montague in the second act of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. She goes on: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Juliet’s implication is that people’s names do not affect who or what they really are. A lot of us might agree with her. For some 21<sup>st</sup> c. folks, a name is not much more than a set of letters assigned somewhat randomly to label something or someone.

From *that* standpoint, the Feast of the Holy Name may seem a little absurd.

But other people take a view more like the first century Middle Eastern Israelites’. For many cultures around the world, a person’s name is an essential part of who they are. Here in the Northwest, Salish parents give their babies a name that reflects a virtue or a trait that they hope the baby will grow into. During adolescence, that name is replaced with another name that refers to a gift or strength that tribal leaders see in the child.

Navajo names are held to carry so much of the person’s essence that they are used only during ceremonies. In day-to-day conversation, a family exchange might include something like “Daughter, where is Grandmother?” Traditional Eastern European names often reflect both family lineage and geographical roots. Some Arab family names are derived from local communities to indicate clan affiliation. Traditional Scottish naming patterns connect birth order and gender to grand-parents’ names to preserve a history of family bloodlines.

“What’s in a name?” For many people, including the ancient Jews, the answer is this: *tremendous power* is in a name. Abram, Sarai, Simon and Saul all changed their names after life-changing encounters with God. After a night of wrestling with God, Jacob demanded to know the name of his mysterious opponent. God refused to divulge the Divine Name, but as a blessing God gave Jacob a new name: Israel, a name that means “one who struggles with God.”

Names in the Torah – especially a new name given by God – are not mere labels. They are signals of character or vocation. In changing Jacob’s name to Israel, God said something about who the children of Israel are supposed to be. They are the people who struggle with God and survive.

This morning, our scripture readings all involve names. The Torah reading from the book of Numbers is a passage containing the “priestly” or the “Aaronic blessing.” This blessing puts God’s mysterious name of God on the children of Israel as if it were a shawl. God’s *name* is laid upon them and God blesses them.

Next, the psalmist exalts the name of God. The English translation “O, LORD, our Governor” is a weak translation of the Hebrew word “YHWH, Adonai” – a phrase that tries to capture the idea that the One God embodies the attributes of all names used to describe God. Some Jewish translations render this opening phrase as “YHWH, *masters* of us...”

References to God in Hebrew scripture – Elohim, Adonai, Hashem, Eloheinu, Shekhinah, Shaddai – these are all either *descriptions* of God or references to God’s *name*, without ever uttering God’s true name itself. God’s name, the most powerful of names, cannot be spoken by human lips because God’s very self transcends anything comprehensible to the human mind. Yet, even the mouths of infants and children can exalt the glory, the majesty and the creative actions of God.

That’s reassuring for us because, as Paul’s letter to the Galatians reminds us, God has sent the Spirit into our hearts. As God’s children and heirs of God’s kingdom, you and I can call God’s name out, “Abba! Father!” Luke’s Gospel gives us the Holy Name given to our brother; the name that we celebrate this morning: “...he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

“What’s in a name?” Luke’s Gospel implies that there was a time for Mary to keep silently in her heart what the angel had told her about her son. Now, eight days after giving birth, the time has come for her to speak the name given by the angel. “...and he was called Jesus.” In Matthew’s version of the nativity, the angel gives the name to Joseph because the author of Matthew is a good Jew and, in first century Jewish culture, the father named the first-born child. Luke’s story runs counter to the cultural norms of the time by entrusting the name of Jesus to Mary, his mother.

In either case, the ancient ritual of circumcision and naming brought Mary and Joseph’s baby boy into the tribes of Israel and consequently into their covenant with God. Naming the baby Jesus, or Yeshua as Mary and Joseph probably pronounced it, carried particular meaning for the Hebrew people. Yeshua means “God delivers.” The name itself carries hope for deliverance for the people who struggle with God.

The name Jesus or Yeshua also refers back to a great hero of Israel’s past, the successor to Moses named Joshua, which is a more ancient rendering of the name. Moses led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, but died within sight of the Promised Land. Before he died, Moses chose one man from each of the 12 tribes as scouts to prepare for retaking the land that God had promised to their ancestors. From the tribe of Ephraim, Moses choose his

protégé, a young man named Hoshea but tellingly changed his name to Joshua, “God delivers.”

After Moses died, Joshua brought the Israelites back home. Through Joshua God re-established the covenant of loyalty between the Israelites and God. Through Joshua, God completed the deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt and enabled them to become who they were created to be. Through Joshua, God delivered the people to once again take on the mantle of God’s mysterious name as the children of Israel.

By naming their son Jesus, Mary and Joseph evoked Joshua in the minds of the other children of Israel, who surely had expectations and hopes. Of course, in Matthew’s rendition of the early days of Jesus, the Holy Family next flees to Egypt and are exiled there until Herod died.

But today, in Luke’s telling, astonished shepherds have gone home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Today, the Christ-child is just eight days old, newly circumcised and named; his adulthood and ministry yet to unfold. Today, we are gathered in this place to celebrate the gift of God’s love made manifest in the child who still lives into the promise of his Holy Name: “God delivers.”

Today is also the first day of the secular calendar. And just as the story of Jesus’ adulthood lies ahead of us, so too, does all of 2017 – a new year already promising to be full of opportunities and perils; so much still open to possibility and so little truly settled.

Next week, we will baptize two children into the body of Jesus Christ. In the ritual of baptism, ordinary water becomes holy and washes ordinary people clean. Then they will be brought into our covenant with God as children of God. We will promise to stand with them and support them as they grow into the potential and the vocation that God has planted within them.

With that in mind, looking out at the horizon, we can already see a great deal of uncertainty and turmoil ahead for these children—for all children, come to that. Other people might be overcome by their anxieties and fears. Other people may be left wringing their hands or acting out in anger or feeling as if they have no paths to a brighter future. Maybe you can even feel some of those responses rising in you—I can from time to time.

But we have something else, something exceptional, that we can nurture in the world. We have something trustworthy to put our hopes into.

Here’s what’s different: We stand before the uncertainty of the days to come in the name of God, united in God’s spirit with prophets, apostles, saints and martyrs. We stand in the name of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and sing the song that never ends: “Holy, holy, holy” in gratitude.

“What’s in a name?” In the name of God, we stand with our grand-mothers and grandfathers in the faith, made holy to serve God’s mercy and justice; made holy to proclaim God’s loyalty and truth. In the name of God, we practice and share God’s love and peace right now, trusting that the reign of God is coming in its fullness in God’s time. In the name of God, we live and work as the blessed children of God, given to be a blessing to the world.

And that, dear Juliet, *that* is what is in a name.

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Works consulted:

Ramshaw, Gail. *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002.