

January 1, 2017
The Holy Name
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 8
Philippians 2:5-11
Luke 2:15-21

Happy eighth day of Christmas! Happy Feast of the Holy Name!

That's probably not the "Happy" you were expecting. It's New Year's Day, *and* it's still the season of Christmas. The eighth day after his birth, for us the eighth day of Christmas, is the day when Jesus would have been formally "named" in the Jewish tradition.

In our time and place, the act of naming a child is as important for parents as it has been in cultures around the world for millennia. When a child is born, the first things other people ask the news-bearer are, "Is it a boy or a girl?" and, "What's his/her name?"

In a previous sermon I touched on the problematic implications of the binary boy/girl boxes. And we're going to delve into that deeper at another time. Today I want to focus on the act of naming. In my household we spend enormous energy just to name our pets. For prospective parents, it can feel like the decision of a lifetime—which in some way, it is. Most parents would probably be relieved if, as happened with Mary, God sent an angel to simply announce the name of the child.

Part of why naming is such a momentous decision is because, as for Jesus, it's about identity. It's about how and what that person will "be" in the world. At root, it seems to me that *naming* is associated with *hope*. Naming is an act of hope; naming is a source of hope.

Besides Jesus, our tradition names our messiah in a lot of ways: Emmanuel or God With Us, Prince of Peace, Son of Righteousness, Light of the World. I could go on. But they're all about hope—hope that we get from the promise of God's presence during our earthy journey, the hope we get from the ultimate promise of a journey that continues after death.

The association of naming with hope works with all sorts of naming. And so, today, I want us all to do an exercise of naming. This is kind of like making New Year's resolutions, but with a spiritual slant and without the guilt or pressure. To that end, today we're going to do together something called one-on-ones. One-on-ones are basically structured conversations between two people. One person talks while the other listens, and then you swap off. That's it. There's no reporting out. There's no follow-up.

One-on-ones are often used for faith-based community organizing. When people from different congregations come together, one-on-ones are a great way to build relationships. They quickly help people begin to get to know one another, to learn about each other's values and hopes. For the same reason, they can be valuable within congregations. There are so many people we see briefly on Sundays but have never had the chance to have a real conversation with. I'm hoping that doing them today will help build and strengthen relationships among us. I'm hoping that doing them today will build up among us hope for the coming year.

One essential part of naming is that there needs to be someone to hear. As God’s ears in the world, we are called to be listeners for one another. Intentional conversation is holy conversation. It has a power that goes well beyond the two people directly engaged. In that, I believe it is like prayer, and it has the power to change the world.

On the handouts is a brief description of the process. [Review the process, below.] That’s it!

[Do the one-on-ones. After everyone has reassembled, offer the prayer following.]

Collect for Guidance from the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
[BCP, 100]

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One-on-One Conversations at St. Thomas’s

Process:

1. Reflect silently on the prompt below [2 minutes].
2. Pair off with someone you don’t know well. Move to a quieter spot if you wish.
3. Decide who will speak first.
4. That person speaks while the other listens [4 minutes].
 - Speaker: Use “I” statements.
 - Listener: Listen, but invite the story (“Why?” “Tell me more about ...”).
5. The speaker and the listener switch roles [4 minutes].

The timekeeper will tell you when each time segment is up.

Prompt:

*Name something that you think
God is up to in your life and/or your community.
Tell a story about how or why you named this.*