

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

Today is the first of January,  
the eighth day after Christmas,  
the end of the Christmas octave.

It is the day set aside in our calendar  
to remember the naming of Jesus.

The eighth day after birth  
is the ceremonial day of naming and circumcision  
according to Jewish law.

Prior to the 1979 Prayerbook  
this feast day was called the Circumcision of our Lord.

This holy day entered the church calendar sometime before the year 567  
because early church leaders hoped  
that a day of fasting and prayer  
might help to counter the pagan festival of Saturnalia  
with its feasting and excesses  
at the beginning of the new year.

It's quite possible,  
and even probable,  
that the date of Christmas was actually set in the calendar  
by backing up eight days from new years day  
because of this same logic.

It is quite clear that their attempt failed,  
here we are a couple of thousand years later  
with only one service today instead of our normal two,  
because of the expected fall off in attendance.

That being said,

I don't think this in any way invalidates the holiday,  
only the reasoning of those early church leaders.  
Naming and circumcision is one of the important milestones  
in the life of a faithful Jew.

I have often wondered  
why we don't have a corresponding feast for the Bar-mitzvah of Jesus,  
a ceremony just as important as circumcision.

I must admit that I haven't looked into the history of the ceremony.  
A quick trip to the Wikipedia tells me  
that the Bar-mitzvah ceremony did not exist in the time of the Bible,  
but indications of understandings like it  
begin to appear in the Talmud.

Perhaps the Bar-mitzvah ceremony wasn't started  
until after the destruction of the temple and the resulting diaspora.

On the other hand,  
perhaps the incident of the twelve year old Jesus "lost" in the temple  
is the remaining fragment of an earlier story of Jesus' Bar-mitzvah,  
or a ceremony something like it.

I'll leave the final resolution of that mystery  
to scholars of greater weight than I, your humble servant.

I bring all this up as a way to help us anchor Jesus in the world.  
To give depth and breadth to the incarnation.  
To help us remember that Jesus was a real human being  
who walked the earth so many years ago.

And just as importantly,  
to remember that Jesus was born as a child  
and lived in every way as one of us,  
growing up in the same way that all of us grew up,  
with the same struggles, and insecurities,

little victories and growing wisdom.

To think anything else is to diminish what he did for us,  
and what he came to teach us.

With the 1979 Prayerbook

the Circumcision of our Lord

was joined to another Feast day from the early church,  
the Feast of the Holy Name.

First celebrated in 1530,

The Feast of the Holy Name has been celebrated

on various days in the middle of January

by various parts of the church

at different times in history,

and is now celebrated by the Roman Catholic church

on the second Sunday after the Epiphany.

It is a day set aside to remember the power of the Holy name of Jesus.

Repeatedly in the Gospel of John,

Jesus tells his disciples

that if they ask for something in his name,

either he or the Father will grant it.

It is on this account

that so many of our prayers end with the phrase,

“In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

And so with all this in mind,

today we come to our feast of the Holy Name,

the day when we remember both the naming of Jesus,

and the power that name has for us.

As the angel foretold,

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,

and you will name him Jesus.

He will be great,

and will be called the Son of the Most High,

and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,

and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart

and after eight days had passed,

it was time to circumcise the child;

and he was called Jesus,

the name given by the angel

before he was conceived in the womb.

It is on this day that we remember the power of a name --

the name Jesus.

In Hebrew, Yeshua,

the name we translate as Jesus,

literally means savior, or deliverer.

The monogram of the Latin spelling of Jesus,

IHS,

was often carried at the head of processions in the early church

in place of a cross.

Nowadays, the monogram of Jesus

is often incorporated into the design of processional crosses,

as well as other forms of church regalia.

The symbol of a name is powerful.

And the act of naming is a sacred act.

We know that by going through the simple process of giving something a name.

Anything,

whether an object or a person

is in some way difficult to name.

It can't just be any name,  
it must be the right name.

Parents often struggle to find the name that is just right for their new child.

As Beverly went into labor almost twenty-six years ago  
we had no idea what the sex of our child would be.

We had settled on one boys name, Nathaniel.

If it was a girl we were in a bit of a quandary.

We had narrowed the list down to about a dozen.

We just hoped that if it was a girl  
she would look like one of our chosen twelve.

If she didn't, I don't know what we would have done.

Well, God had it all figured out and we had a boy, Nathaniel,  
and you know the rest of the story.

Even with help, it seems that Mary and Joseph struggled  
in the naming of their first born son.

We hear in the Gospel today  
that Mary treasured the words of the shepherds  
and pondered them in her heart.

We don't hear much of Joseph in the Gospel of Luke,  
but in Matthew he does his own pondering  
as he too is visited by angels in various dreams.

This pondering lead them all to do God's will  
and name the boy Yeshua,

Jesus,

and to raise the savior of the world  
in their household.

As we again ponder the incarnation  
and the mystery of God found in the person of a baby lying in a manger,

we too can draw strength from the model of Mary and Joseph.  
For God enters our lives the same way,  
always as an infant,  
totally dependant upon us for nurture and support.  
Though sometimes urgent as a crying child  
or endearing as a laughing child,  
or peaceful as a sleeping child,  
the spirit of Christ can do nothing without our support.  
With that support  
the Spirit grows in our lives very much like a child,  
somewhat under our control,  
though often rebellious and difficult to handle,  
while at the same time gently changing us  
and leading us to places  
we would never have gone to before.  
That too is the mystery of the incarnation.  
Not only did God come to us,  
but God came to live and grow among us.  
As we continue to name God in our lives during this Christmas season,  
and throughout this new year,  
God grant us the strength  
to feed and nurture the Spirit of Christ growing in our lives,  
and to follow where it would lead us.  
Amen.