

What's Your Name?

Today is a feast day of the church that we celebrate only rarely.

It comes 8 days after Christmas, and since that day usually falls on a weekday, the larger community rarely celebrates it.

Today's feast day is the feast of the Holy Name.

The holy name of Jesus, given 8 days after his birth according to Jewish tradition.

First things first.

Jesus was a Jew!

Not Jew-"ish" like that New York congressman who's in the news this week, but a real live, born and bred Jew!

Probably for most of us here, this is old news.

Yet, there's a ton of folks who call themselves Christian who swear Jesus was not a Jew.

Go figure!

So, according to Jewish custom, Mary and Joseph bring the infant to the synagogue to have this little boy circumcised and named.

What's in a name?

That's the question we are each of us invited to ponder this morning.

What's in a name?

Some names seem to be almost prophetic in how they describe the person who wears the name.

Take Angelina Jolie for example: "beautiful Angel" seems to aptly describe this philanthropic actress.

And how about the fellow who engineered the largest Ponzi scheme in our nation's history not so long ago: Bernie Madoff.

He sure did!

Isabella Baumfree is a famous woman, but you probably know her by the name she adopted for herself.

After many years as an African American slave in the mainland, a life that included beatings, losing the man she loved, and giving birth to 13 children, she escaped from slavery and became a Christian, a feminist and a preacher.

She changed her name to Sojourner Truth and embodied that new name as she traveled and spoke truth to power for the rest of her life.

Much like our newest Supreme Court Justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, Sojourner Truth confronted her opponents with their own logic.

Pointing to a clergyman one day, she said:

"That little man in black over there says women can't have as much rights as men 'cause Christ wasn't a woman!"

Where did your Christ come from?', she asked.

'From God and a woman,' she answered.

Man had nothing to do with him.'"

Sojourner Truth indeed!

Names are a pathway to our identity.

For Jesus, whose name means "God saves," his identity is carved in the journey that brings us to this day of naming.

It's happening in Bethlehem.

Traveling with his parents to his father's hometown (remember the decree by Quirinius that all return home to be registered?), you have to wonder, where are all of Joseph's relatives?

Here in Hawaii, we know all about welcoming family who are traveling.

Sometimes we offer hospitality out of love.

Other times out of obligation.

But whether it's love or obligation, the hospitality is there.

Not so for Jesus and his folks.

The traditional family customs of ancient Israel were, if anything, even stronger than ours are today when it comes to taking care of relatives.

After all, life was much more fragile in those days and family ties were truly the ties that bind.

But not so for the Holy Family.

Mary and Joseph might have expected hospitality from their family on the night of Jesus' birth; yet their family is strangely absent.

Was it shame at an unwed teen?

Was it the "too quick to judge" crowd who sizes up a situation and relegates them as castoffs, people rightfully left to fend for themselves?

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus embraces outsiders perhaps because from the very day of his birth, he's an outsider.

Only shepherds and illegal aliens (that's the Magi) attend to this child and his parents, because no one else will.

And so it is in these circumstances that he is named Jesus, meaning "God saves."

And with that naming, Jesus receives his identity.

And with that identity, Jesus begins a life that points to a God who saves us in ways that are utterly unexpected.

Because God saves us not with shock and awe — but through humble surrender.

By accepting whoever and whatever crosses his path.

By taking the deep dive of letting go of everything, even his family, even life itself.

The poet T.S. Elliot once wrote a book of poems about cats.

Long after he wrote it, the book of poems got turned into what would become the longest running Broadway play in history, aptly named Cats!

One of the poems, and later one of the songs in the play, is about how cats are named.

Each cat, we are told, has three names.

The first is the name given the cat by humans.

Names like Snowball and Fluffy and Gus.

The second is the name given by other cats.

Names that are strange to our ears and hard to pronounce.

Names like Munkustrap and Quaxo and Concopat.

And then there is the third name.

This is the name known only to the cat itself.

This is the name the cat meditates upon as it sits in the window sill, gazing out of the picture window.

It is the cat's secret name.

And it occurs to me this Sunday in which we celebrate the holy name, that we each of us too have three names.

First is our given name.

Some folks love their names, others not so much and many are perhaps indifferent.

But these are the names by which we are known to Social Security and TSA and bosses.

It's our most public, and perhaps least revealing, name.

Our second name is the nickname we are often given by our loved ones or close friends.

Girlie and Boy, Butch, Honey and Sweetie come to mind.

My 22 year old daughter is named Alexandra Teatuahere.

Alexandra meaning "helper of mankind" and Teatuahere meaning "the love of God."

So her given name translates as "the helper of mankind is the love of God."

I call her TTH.

And then there is our third name.

Each of us has a third name, although sometimes we forget.

In a world where the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church is blessing the slaughter of Ukrainian civilians, while we so often

worship at the altar of the Pentagon and military budgets, when a very popular Christmas song this year was something about Christmas being the Fourth of July in December; it's easy to forget our secret name.

Yet, this is the name we are each of us given by He before whom "every head shall bow, before whom every knee shall bend, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth."

Your secret name, and mine, is one you might meditate upon as you sit quietly beside the picture window.

A name to embrace, as it embraces you.

And as you reflect upon the course of your spiritual journey from last year until now, as you recognize moments of gain and times of loss, if you have stumbled and if you have risen again, hold dearly to your secret name, and allow it to hold you as well.

Our secret name helps us when we are tempted to surrender to the prevailing culture of dog eat dog.

Our secret name is a life line when we hear the subtle whisper to seize control of people, places and things, rather than to let it go, and let God surprise us on our journey.

And as we begin the journey of a new year, always remember that "our destination is never a place, but rather, a new way of looking at things." Henry Miller.

As Elliot came to see:

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

Your secret name is the strength for your journey — and you know
it well.

Your secret name is this: "Child of God."

And even more: a "Beloved Child of God."

Perhaps with that we can say,

+amen.