

## Holy Name

Lk 2.15-21

Let's start with a pop quiz: what's today's gift? There are twelve days in the season of Christmas, right? As far as the church is concerned, it's still Christmas, and today's the eighth day. What's today's gift? A partridge in a pear tree, two turtledoves, three French hens; any guesses as to the eighth day? Eight maids a'milking.

Now for the bonus round (for those who want to win the grand raffle): can anyone tell me what those eight maids are supposed to represent? You've all heard the story that the "Twelve Days of Christmas" was originally intended to be a kind of teaching tool designed to help people remember elements of the Christian faith, right? The partridge in the pear tree is Christ on the cross; the two turtledoves are the two testaments of the Bible; the three French hens are the three cardinal virtues of faith, hope, and love (or maybe they're the three kings).

Any guesses as to what the "eight maids a'milking" are supposed to represent? The eight Beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount (actually, one could argue that there are nine Beatitudes, but who's counting?). If you want to know what the rest of the symbols stand for, see me after class and I'll set you up. And, by the way, there's little to no historical evidence suggesting that "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was originally intended as a teaching tool for the faith.

This is indeed the eighth day of Christmas, and because it's the eighth day of Christmas it's a feast day. But it's not the feast of the eight Beatitudes; it's the feast of the Holy Name, a feast dedicated to the name of Jesus. Ordinarily, of course, we celebrate feast days associated with people or events: the Feast of St. John the Baptist, or the Feast of the Transfiguration. But today we observe a feast dedicated to a name, the holy name of Jesus. What's going on here?

This is a feast that requires a little unpacking. This is an observance that didn't really get going in the life of the church until the medieval period: it was originally an observance associated with the Franciscans, and it didn't make its way to the English church—the Anglican church—until the fifteenth century. The primary purpose of this feast is to encourage reflection on the meaning of the name of Jesus and what that name tells us about the salvation God has accomplished for us.

The name "Jesus," of course, comes from the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* or Joshua, which means "God will save." Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus makes a bigger deal about the name of Jesus than does Luke's account: in Matthew, an angel of the Lord appears, not to Mary, but to Joseph, and the angel tells Joseph that Mary is going to bear a son. "You are to name him Jesus," says the angel, "for he will save his people from their sins." Simply to pronounce the name of Jesus is almost a kind of miniature creed, a witness to the fact that it is God who saves us and not we ourselves.

But there's even more to it than that: the feast of the Holy Name not only reminds us that Jesus is the one in whom and through God saves, the name of Jesus also bears witness to the variety of

ways that this salvation is made manifest. Think about all the different forms salvation took in the ministry of Jesus: healing from sickness, deliverance from oppression, the forgiveness of sins, hope in the face of hopelessness, meaning in the face of meaninglessness, new life in the midst of death. All of these things are called to mind when we testify to the name of Jesus.

And there's even more: pretty much the whole of the faith and practice of the early church was pervaded by the name of Jesus. They were known by the name of Jesus: their very identity was grounded in their association with Christ. The message they proclaimed, their gospel, was nothing other than a witness to the name of Jesus. Peter's testimony before the Sanhedrin is an excellent example of this: the high priests and scribes arrest Peter for preaching the gospel and ask him, "By what power and in whose name are you doing this?" And Peter answers, "The name of Jesus of Nazareth." That was the sum total of his gospel.

The early church baptized new converts to the faith in the name of Jesus. They cured people of disease in the name of Jesus, they delivered people from spiritual bondage in the name of Jesus, they helped reconcile those divided by animosity in the name of Jesus. They even gave thanks for being persecuted because of their association with the name of Jesus. In other words, pretty much every dimension of their experience as Christians was governed by their commitment to and their faith in the name of Jesus, and in that name and through that name they changed the world.

And there's one more piece here, one more theme having to do with our celebration of the feast of the Holy Name: the name of Jesus testifies to the reign of God in the world. We got a bit of this in our lesson from Paul's letter to the Philippians: God has "highly exalted him, and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

So the name of Jesus is much more than just a convenient way of identifying a nice man who lived a long time ago. The name of Jesus is itself a testimony to God's redemptive action; it's a testimony to the healing and the deliverance that is offered in that name, and it's a signifier of God's reign in the world.

Now, here's the interesting part, the unbelievable part: every one of these different dimensions of the feast of the Holy Name has as much to do with us as it does with Jesus. The feast of the Holy Name can rightly be considered a celebration of the mission and ministry of the church.

Who are we? We are those who are known because of our association with Jesus; we are called "Christians" because, before we are anything else, we aspire to be his disciples. His name not only identifies him, it identifies us as well.

Because we are called by his name, we are called to bear witness to his name. What did we see in the example of Peter from the book of Acts? The testimony of the early church was to the name of Jesus. We who would be his disciples are called to that same witness, to proclaim his name in and to the world.

Because we are called by his name, we are called to do the work he himself did. We are to bring

people to faith in God through him, and to baptize them and to teach them all that Jesus has taught us. We are to help people seek healing and deliverance in and through the name of Jesus, we are to practice reconciliation in the name of Jesus, we are even called to give thanks in the name of Jesus when we find ourselves persecuted or in trouble. Just as the name of Jesus is a miniature creed, it's also a miniature mission; it signifies and it describes our reason for being.

And here's the most extraordinary part: because we are called by his name, because we carry on the work he himself did, we share in his reign. As those who bear the name of Christ, we participate in the sovereignty of Christ in this world; we are the ones in whom and through the reign of God made manifest in Jesus is to be exercised in the world.

This is what it means to be made in the image of God and to be remade in the image of Christ. Remember God's command to those he created in his image: "be fruitful and multiply and have dominion." Through the name of Jesus, we are invited to be fruitful in all areas of our lives and to exercise dominion over the world, not for the sake of exploiting the world, but for the sake of helping the world to become what it was meant to be, the place where God's glory and God's wisdom and God's power are made manifest.

All that, contained in one little name: *Yehoshua*, "God will save." God has saved, and God is saving, and God will save. God has given us himself in the gift of Jesus, and we are known by his name. So let us on this day give thanks for the gift of that name, and commit ourselves to bringing honor and glory to that name in all that we say and in all that we do. Amen.

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