

**The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain**  
**Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church**  
**Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee**  
**The Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ (January 1, 2023)**

*Numbers 6:22–27*

*Psalm 8*

*Philippians 2:5–11*

*Luke 2:15–21*

The Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ is one of my very favorite commemorations in the entire Christian calendar. Because it is always on January the 1<sup>st</sup>, or New Year's Day, it only falls on a *Sunday* when Christmas Day does as well, or about once every seven years. Otherwise this would be the First Sunday after Christmas Day, with different prayers and readings, but the Holy Name takes precedence. This also means that, when the Feast of the Holy Name *doesn't* fall on a Sunday, it much more frequently occurs on a weekday. Therefore, in most years not many people actually observe it, as it means going to church on New Year's Day.

When I was a young assistant priest in eastern North Carolina, at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Kinston, I think that I was always assigned to be the celebrant and preacher on the Holy Name. I *don't* think that this was because the rector had had a wild New Year's Eve and couldn't get out of bed, but rather because he simply preferred that I take the service. But I was always happy to do so. For one thing, the Eucharist really seemed like the absolutely best way to start a brand-new year. For another, there were always only one or two other people in attendance, which gave the service a special intimacy. So I have a genuine fondness for the Feast of the Holy Name, partly because of these past experiences with it, and partly because it is appropriate to observe New Year's Day by going to church rather than nursing a hang-over—although of course you can do both, and maybe some of us here this morning are doing so.

But what about the feast itself? As our gospel reading from Luke, Chapter 2 indicates, the Feast of the Holy Name commemorates the significant moment when, eight days after the birth of Jesus, he was circumcised according to the Law of Moses and given the name "Jesus" according to the angelic instructions to both Mary and Joseph. I'll come back to his name in a moment, but some of you may recall that, until the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, this Feast was rather known as The Circumcision of our Lord Jesus Christ. I suspect that it was renamed "The Feast of the Holy Name" forty-four years ago not because of any specific qualms about male circumcision, but

because of a more general *modern* squeamishness when it comes to talking about the body. Our ancestors in the faith were more forthright about such matters. For example, here is the original collect for today, which last appeared in the 1928 Prayer Book:

Almighty God, who madest thy blessed Son to be circumcised, and obedient to the law for man; Grant us the true circumcision of the Spirit; that, our hearts, and all our members, being mortified from all worldly and carnal lusts, we may in all things obey thy blessed will; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This older emphasis on the mortification of the flesh and its lusts also doesn't sit well with more contemporary Christian tendencies toward the affirmation and endorsement of our bodily desires. So it is not at all surprising that in 1979 the feast was rebranded to focus on the naming rather than the circumcision of Christ, and an entirely new collect was written:

Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation: Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

So, having duly acknowledged the original title of today's commemoration, I now want to focus on its new emphasis on the holy name of Jesus. As you may know, Jesus's actual Hebrew name was *Yeshua*, which translated directly into English is *Joshua*. But the New Testament was written in Greek, and then later translated into Latin before eventually much, much later being translated into English, so that's how we get the familiar rendering of "Jesus." No matter the language, his name means, "God saves." When Gabriel tells Mary to name her son "Jesus" in the previous chapter of Luke, no specific explanation is given; but in Matthew, Chapter 1, Joseph is told by an angel in a dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, *for he will save his people from their sins.*" But in addition to the *meaning* of the name there is also the powerful *association* with Joshua in the Old Testament, who after the death of Moses led the people of Israel into their Promised Land. Likewise, the New Testament presents Jesus as *both* a new Moses *and* a new Joshua, as a new *teacher* of God's law and a new conquering *hero* of God's people.

This is why our first and second Scripture lessons and psalm all focus on the power of divine names. In the Book of Numbers, God tells Moses and Aaron to bless the people in God's name; Psalm 8 twice exclaims, "O Lord our Governor, how exalted is your Name in all the world!"; and in Paul's Letter to the Philippians we hear that God has given to Jesus "the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Because of this, Christians have always held the name of Jesus in deep devotion: we make our prayers "in Jesus' name," we avoid using his name in profane or disrespectful ways, we often bow our heads or make other reverential gestures when his name is heard or said, and we sometimes meditate on his name in silent prayer or in the well-known and aptly-named "Jesus Prayer" of the Eastern Orthodox Church: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner."

In all these ways, Christians strive to express their profound respect and love not only for the person but even for the name of Jesus. So on this Feast of the Holy Name, which is also New Year's Day, as well as the First Sunday after Christmas Day, let us pray:

Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation: Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*