

Feast of the Holy Name
January 1, 2023, Year A

What's in a Name?
By the Rev. Salying Wong

"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." Only in Luke do we hear this one verse for which we have this unique festival today for the naming of Jesus. This event is so important that, unlike almost all other feast days, if it lands on a Sunday, it takes precedence over the Sunday readings. (For those of you who must know, the other two feasts that are like this are the Presentation and the Transfiguration. Again, that means if these feasts land on a Sunday, they take precedence over that Sunday's normal routine.)

What's in a name? Maybe a rose by any other name might smell as sweet. But roses are not cognitive beings and don't seem to get lost in their egos. The truth is we have a lot of purchase in our names. Who named us? What does the name mean? Were we named after someone? Does this name fit with our gender identity?

In thinking about my own name, I realized that Jesus and I have similar names. Following Chinese tradition, my paternal grandfather gave me my name and it means "hero". (He was hoping for a grandson.) When we think of heroes, we think of someone who saves. Like Superman. My name could alternately be translated as "savior." The difference, though, between the way my name is structured is that it is supposed to describe who I am and what I'm up to. Jesus' name points away from himself.

"Jesus" is the Greek form of the name Joshua, which is often translated as "God saves." It is more precisely translated as "Yahweh saves." In Hebrew, "God" is a generic word for divine being; but "Yahweh" is God's personal name revealed to Moses in the burning bush. When we hear Jesus' name, we hear about the one who saved the Israelites from slavery in captivity under Pharaoh in Egypt. For our own time, we hear the name Yahweh and it reminds us that God frees captivity of all kinds. This name points straight to the heart of the gospel, "The blind shall see; the deaf shall hear; the mute will speak; the leper are cleansed; those imprisoned will be set free; the poor will have good news brought to them; and the dead are raised!" Liberation is at the heart of the Yahweh; freedom is God's salvation. We do not take this promise in vain. That is what we mean when we do not take the name in vain—it means that we trust that God's promises are not empty. "Yahweh saves."

How our God saves is the opposite of Superman. Superman is our fantasy of God. Super powerful. A good guy who makes life easy. And even can make us rich if we ask him to squeeze coal in his hands and pop out a diamond. Nice easy God. Our hero!

Of course, life isn't flat like a fantasy. It is complicated, nuanced and is in need of constant reflection and revelation to be converted—to be saved. Our God meets us here, in real life. But this God isn't beholden to the structures of this life. To make a big point, God fulfills the salvation story began by the prophets by choosing to find the most trustworthy and trusting soul—not in a planet far, far away that feeds off the sun—but in a poor town called Nazareth. This God breaks the rules constantly. But on this day, on this Holy Name feast, instead of allowing for patriarchal custom, it is Mary who names Jesus according to the gift of the angel. She honors God by embedding this liberation of Yahweh into her son. Jesus, Jesu, Jeshua, Joshua: Yahweh saves!

This is how God saves, then. Coming very close, very, close. Like the embrace of Mary around her baby. The mutual trust of Mary and Yahweh, leaning into each other, is a trust that is also for us. Here God saves us from ourselves—from the tenacity of the ego, from the fear of life, from the nihilism of evil. In fact, here is where God performs the greatest miracle—in all this suffering, love is real. Love comes, it comes and comes. Yahweh is here. Yahweh saves. And with God here with us, we can anastasis—get up, rise up, and participate in declaring this liberation in the living of our lives. Not as ones who triumphed; but as ones who know the fidelity of God even in the midst of the worst things.

Today, then, let us trust in the name of Jesus, as the very heart of the message of gospel: Yahweh saves.