

There was once a man named John Haversniversnatcher who hated his name and when he finally was able to do something about it, he did. He hired a lawyer and filed the necessary paperwork to have it officially changed to *Bill* Haversniversnatcher.

We have all been given names at our birth. Sometimes we have been given family names. Sometimes we have been given our names simply because our parents liked the name. If we look back in our family trees, we usually find some interesting names. I think the most interesting name so far in my family tree is Magdalena Philipina! Some names go in and out of style. I haven't heard many babies lately named Myrtle or Mable, no babies lately named Woodrow or Oscar. Some of the most popular names in 2016 include Sophia and Emma, Jackson and Benjamin. Regarding last names, I can remember my mother reminding me when I went out of the house more than a few times, to remember that I represented the family! Names can give us a sense of belonging, a sense of identity.

And names are not simply for individuals, they are for a people, too, as we see in our first reading from Numbers. During the time of Moses, God's people were learning who they were, beginning to understand their identity *as* God's people as they wandered through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. Moses' brother Aaron was to bestow upon the Israelites this blessing, "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." This was to be a way of putting God's name on them and by doing so God was blessing them. God was giving them identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose.

Today we celebrate the feast day of the Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is always January 1. Sometimes it is more simply referred to as Holy Name Day. It is a day when we consider the holy name of Jesus. In Scripture names are important and there is often theological significance to a person's name. Moses who appears in our first reading today means "to pull out or draw out" (as of water) recalling Pharaoh's daughter who rescues Moses from the bull rushes. And the Apostle Peter was given the name as it is derived from the Greek Petros, meaning "rock" and Jesus told Peter he would build the church on this rock, Peter. Jesus is the English form of the word Iesous which is the Greek form of the Aramaic name Yeshu'a. Got all that?

In our Luke passage we are reading the same passage we read on Christmas Day but this time including v. 21, "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." Mary and Joseph didn't have to look in the baby book to see what names were trending. Mary had been told to name him Jesus.

So why "Jesus"? What is so special about the name? In that name Jesus was given his sense of identity, purpose and belonging. This name points to the source of our salvation. Jesus means

“God saves.” As Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, this name is above all names. At this name every knee should bend. Jesus’ name was not just meant for himself but was given for the benefit of all of us. While our individual names are special and give us some sense of who we are and to whom we belong, we are to look for a deeper identity, deeper sense of purpose and deeper sense of belonging in the name of Jesus.

What if we were to begin our new year allowing the name of Jesus to dwell at the center of our lives in some new way? Somehow allow that most holy name to seep into our consciousness so that it begins to change us? Perhaps through prayer and meditation at points and places in the day that we don’t normally pray, like when paying our bills or doing our taxes; when writing our thank you notes after Christmas or vacuuming Christmas tree needles. Maybe whispering Jesus’ name to ourselves when we are waiting at the doctor’s office. If our identity as followers of Jesus is so wrapped up in his, perhaps some of our dark corners will begin to brighten; perhaps our temptation to despair will lessen; perhaps our tendency to criticize unjustly will be transformed into loving more.

If we are to bow at the name of Jesus, the one who saves, the one who gives us new life in every situation, we will need to yield to a power greater than our own. If we are to acknowledge a name that is above all names, we will be set free from all that closes us off from God’s loving hand. If our identity is in the name of Jesus, we will know that we are part of a loving family. We belong. We have a purpose: to love and be loved by God and one another. At the start of this new year, can we remember that as we go back out into the world, we represent the family – the family of God?

Amen.