

The Feast of the Holy Name
Luke 2: 15-21
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

By the convergence of the first Sunday following Christmas Day with the first day of the new calendar year, we have a situation in which a principal feast falls on and takes precedence of a Sunday. Therefore today, instead of celebrating the First Sunday after Christmas by reading the great prologue to John's Gospel, we have what used to be called the Feast of the Circumcision, nowadays Feast of the Holy Name. There are two aspects, for lack of a better word, two points to the story in Luke's Gospel, so casually presented. Luke simply tells us that eight days after his birth it was time to circumcise the child; he was called Jesus, the name dictated by the angel before conception. Two points, two questions: what's in a name; what's in a covenant?

Jewish practice, for as long as history can remember, has been to circumcise male children eight days after birth, giving the child his name at that moment, a name and a sign that binds him into the covenant that God made with Abraham, promising Abraham that God would make of his descendents the greatest of nations and that he would be their God and Abraham's offspring would be God's people, and that this people, this nation, Israel, with its unique relationship with God would be forever and eternally special. Mary and Joseph presented their child for circumcision marking him as a covenant child, special in the eyes of God.

They named their child Jesus (as we call the Hebrew name in English); because they understood that Jesus would save humanity from death, the ramification of sin. The etymology of the name Jesus tells us that it derives from the Hebrew Joshua, passing through first Greek, and then Latin, to finally make it to us in English as Jesus. It is a name, regardless of the language in which it is uttered, that is so holy that Saint Paul told us that at the mention of this holy name every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. What does it mean, the name Jesus? It means that God saves. By the extension of faith, God saves through Jesus, his Incarnate Son, who came into this world to save sinners.

The circumcision is an indelible symbol of God's covenant, and Jesus, as a Jew, was bound into that covenant. But we, too, are bound into God's covenant, made his people by God's own action. We are bound into that covenant by baptism into our Lord salvific death and resurrection. As circumcision is symbolic of God's covenant with Abraham, baptism is symbolic of God's promise that by faith, when we die to self and are born anew into life in Christ, we are adopted into the family of God, redeemed, restored and made one with all the saints who have found salvation in Jesus Christ. With each baptism, the naming of Jesus is once again prophetic, because once, again, in Jesus, God has saved. And so it shall be so long as the sun rises and gives birth to each new day; with each new morning Jesus restores, renews, redeems humanity from sin; and it is for this reason that Christ Jesus came into this world. May the name of Jesus be always praised. *Amen.*

