

Today we celebrate the feast called Holy Name. This is the day Mary and Joseph brought their child to the temple where he was circumcised, and they officially “named” him.

This year, more than 120 million babies will be born on earth. Those who survive will most likely sooner or later be named in one kind of ceremony or another.

Parents choose their babies names in many different ways. I wanted to name our daughter Susannah Laurie: Susannah after my best friend, and Laurie after my sister. Gwen was not excited—she thought it would be awful to name a child Susannah. She thought that people would forever be singing at her: “Oh Susannah, Oh don’t you cry for me...”

Obviously I lost that battle.

At one time anthropologists thought that some groups of people were so "primitive" and unorganized that they didn't use names. Later they realized their error. Just because a group of people have a method for naming that WE don’t recognize does not make them either “primitive” or “unorganized.”

The truth is that names are a part of every culture and they are of enormous importance to the people who choose them, who receive them, and sometimes even to the surrounding communities.

If you happened to live in a society that put great importance in their ancestry, children might get their names from their own family trees.

In some cultures, names are taken from events which happen during the pregnancy of the mother or shortly after the birth of the child.

The giving and receiving of a name is *as major an event* in the life of a family as the giving and receiving of rings is important in a marriage ceremony.

Although in the eyes of the Church the rite of baptism is not primarily a naming ceremony, the giving of the name is certainly a part of it. Each child is baptized with only their given names--- not their surname. So I was

baptized Lisa Dawn, not Lisa Dawn Smith. This is because each Christian child is baptized into the family of Christ- not their own *particular* family.

Not so many years ago, the priest would meet the family and baby at the door of the church building, and would say, "Name this child." Some of us still add this question, just before we baptize the baby, the toddler or the adult.

Names are important. Take Simon Peter. His given name was actually Simon. Jesus knew him as Simon, and then he did something – not unheard of, exactly—but unusual. He renamed him. I am going to call you Cephas, he said. Because you are the rock of this group. And so Simon--which means *he listens*, to Cephas, which means *the rock*.

Names are important.

So--it says in the gospel reading this morning that Mary and Joseph's baby was circumcised and was called *Jesus*, the name given to them by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

But was it really the name the angel gave Mary?

The name Jesus is the Greek translation of the Aramaic and Hebrew name Yeshua—Just like Peter is the Greek word for Cephas. We often call the people in the New Testament by their Greek names. But these names are only a translation. So one is Jesus and the other Yeshua. Is this an important distinction? Oh yes.

This is an important distinction because of what the names mean. The Greek name 'Jesus' is translated as "God is salvation."

"*God is salvation*" is a phrase that names a very passive relationship between God and us. it is merely a statement of belief: "God is salvation. " God DOES nothing. God just IS salvation. It's a statement. Like: the Sun is hot. That statement doesn't tell us how that heat may affect us.

Yeshua = Yah + shuah. Yah is short for Yahweh—the word for God, and shuah means "to save, to rescue." Yeshua means "Yah saves."

In other words, the ***more appropriate*** translation for Jesus' name is **"God saves, or God rescues."**

This means—as I so often was taught in Seminary, that we worship a God who acts in history and in our lives. We don't worship a passive God who is satisfied that we merely believe he is there.

Jesus' name describes a God who actively cares about and actively goes about rescuing lost souls.

The angel gave this Hebrew couple a Hebrew—not a Greek name-- for their son. Just like Peter is the Greek translation of Cephas (which means stone), Jesus is the Greek translation of Yeshua, which means God saves. God rescues.

And now all those parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the parable of the prodigal son—they all make far more sense. They all describe a God that would have been a little unusual to Hebraic ears.

Jesus, Yeshua, didn't teach and talk about a God who was far away, or had to be placated or needed to be feared. Yeshua told story after story about a God who rescued the lost, and saved his people from catastrophe and a life without a sense of love, dignity and belonging.

So when we say we believe in the power of Jesus' name—it doesn't just mean we understand that God is salvation—it means we believe that God is always at work actively in our lives, and in everyone's lives—to *rescue and save us*, and to love us back into the family of God whenever we stray.

Start off this New Year relying on the power of Jesus'—*Yeshua's* Holy Name.

Amen.