

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. Chris Duncan  
January 1, 2012  
Holy Name/Luke 2:15-21

Sanctify us O Lord in truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Good morning, Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year!

As the door opens to the examination room, the doctor apologizes for being 30 minutes late, as if you didn't already realize how long you had been sitting there nervously waiting. She explains the test results were not ready until just now but here they are. The time has finally come...

Or you fall to one knee while opening a box containing a sparkling diamond ring. The words come out of your mouth just as you rehearsed, "will you marry me?" Yet, your mind is so numb by the pressure of the moment that you don't even know if your heart is still beating. And then the pause... the pause is surely no more than a second but nonetheless that pause hangs for what seems like a lifetime as you wait for the answer.

Or you are now home after surgery and you know there is still a long road to recovery. It is so hard to fully understand that sometimes we have to go through pain in the short term in order to keep long term future pain at bay. So your family members help ensure all those things you once did on your own still get done. And you begin to push through the pain of rehab so that you can get back to your life as usual.

Or you hold that precious baby in your arms realizing how she already has you wrapped around her finger and yet she needs you for every little thing. She cannot eat without you. She cannot bathe without you. She cannot do anything without you. And still your heart melts with every movement she makes. The two of you are left there vulnerable.

One of the hard truths to accept about being human is that we are incredibly vulnerable. Our name and all that we do and all that we have mean a lot in society, but there are times in our lives where just being human means that we are left feeling susceptible, defenseless, and exposed. And now that the initial overwhelming excitement of Christmas has past, we sit in this strange place in a season that many have already forgotten is still going on. Advent and the season of hopeful expectation are past and now that season we longed for is here. But the presents are all unwrapped; many of our new gadgets might already be broken; toys have lost their luster; and we've all eaten more cookies than we thought imaginable. And so we sit... just as vulnerable as before but now Christmas Day has past and we find ourselves in the middle of this Christmas season.

It is funny how quickly the Christmas spirit escapes as soon as the gifts are unwrapped and the seasonal dishes are put away. Yes we had so much anticipation leading up to this big merry moment and too often our Norman Rockwell Christmas falls short of picturesque. Instead we find that life is complicated and life does not give us much of a break for our Christmas season that in fact lasts 12 full days. Perhaps we all need to stop... stop the wave of societal pressures crashing in upon us in order to remember that Christmas is more than simply a big birthday party for Jesus.

Christmas: the moment the creator entered his creation. He came not as a god on Mount Olympus or a king upon a golden throne, but as a fragile and innocent baby. God came to the earth vulnerable. Singer/Songwriter Bebo Norman writes: "And all fell silent for the cry of an infant, the voice of God was dividing history for those with eyes to see, the Son would shine from earth that night... and the angels filled the sky all of heaven wondered why, why their King would choose to be, be a baby born to die." Christmas: the moment the creator entered his creation. We, the Church, serve as witnesses to this truth, to this incarnation. It is not a one day event but rather a daily miracle of Emmanuel, God with us. That is what this twelve day celebration, this Christmas season is truly about.

"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."

Today is a special day in the Christmas Season called "Holy Name." In the final verse in today's lesson we find words that look both backward and forward. It looks backward with the reminder that the naming of the child, Jesus, fulfills Mary's obedience to the word of the angel prior to her conception... the name Jesus meaning salvation. The story also rolls forward with fulfillment. The circumcision and naming on the 8<sup>th</sup> day begins a series of events reflecting the fact that Jesus' parents represent the best of Jewish piety and obedience to the Law of Moses. The story that is beginning to unfold is "according to scripture." Yes, God's salvific plan is beginning to come to fruition.

But what is in a name? From the beginning of scripture, we see that when it comes to God, a name carries a lot of importance. As many of you know, the name of God, YHWH is a sacred thing in the Jewish faith. In fact, it was so sacred that it was not to be spoken. You also might remember that from Exodus we learn the meaning is "I am." Well a lot is lost in translation. For Hebrew has a verb tense that we don't have in English. It is a verb tense that encompasses past, present, and future. So "I am" becomes "I have always been, I am, and I will always be." In other words, God is beginning and end and everything in between.

What the early Israelites knew is that by God sharing his name, God offered himself in a vulnerable way with an invitation to further understand the nature of who God is. The Israelites realized that this was not to be taken lightly or abused. Often we guard ourselves from sharing too much because we are scared to find out how people will respond to us. That is not the nature of God. God makes himself vulnerable so that we might come to know God more fully. And in an even more vulnerable way, God revealed himself even further. He came as Jesus... a human with a name. And not just any human but a poor baby born in a barn... born just as susceptible to the hurts of the world as we are... a human born to die. What God revealed about himself through Jesus is that in his very nature there is love and yet still so much more than we can begin to comprehend.

Yes, Jesus is savior. Jesus is messiah, lord, son of man, son of God, heir of David, Good Shepherd, and the list goes on... but these are only just adjectives that describe his nature. They are not his name for he is not only God but he is human with a name. He is Jesus. So Christmas is about more than a birthday celebration... it is a celebration of incarnation. Christmas is about a miracle, an in-breaking that began in a manger filled with wonder, fear, joy, and doubt. Christmas is about the continued miracle

that continues in our lives today. For we as the Church are incarnational. We, just as vulnerable as a little baby asleep on a bed made of hay, are empowered by our Savior Jesus to continue that good work as the hands and feet of Christ. No matter the wonder, doubt, joy, and fear that you might have, there is always hope. What is the answer to the question posed in the song, why the King would choose to be a baby born to die? God became vulnerable for love or as the Nicene Creed puts it "For us and our salvation he came down from heaven..."

So although December 25 has past and although we are still vulnerable, remember that our hope is alive. The Christmas celebration continues because the Creator stepped into creation just as vulnerable as we are and his love, mercy, forgiveness, grace, and salvation never left.

As we sang in our opening hymn this morning, "Humbled for a season, to receive a Name from the lips of sinners, unto whom he came, faithfully he bore it spotless to the last, brought it back victorious when from death he passed."

I wish you a Merry Christmas today and for the remainder of our Christmas season.