

A Sermon for Christmas I, Year B
The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ
January 1, 2006
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Making all things new.

Good morning. Thank you all for gathering for Morning Prayer today. Morning Prayer is an office which has its origins in the liturgy of ancient Judaism. The priests at the Temple in Jerusalem offered sacrifices in the morning and the evening. Faithful Jews would go to the Temple at these times to participate in the prayers which accompanied the sacrifices. This custom of gathering for both morning and evening prayers at the Temple spread to the synagogues throughout Judea, and when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70, survived in the synagogues. After the Roman Empire fell centuries later, Christianity retreated into monasteries, where monks elaborated the structure of these prayers into eight daily offices sung by the monastic community. Fortunately for Episcopalians, Thomas Cranmer, the author of the first prayer book, consolidated all of these services into Morning Prayer, which he called Matins, and Evening Prayer, which he called Evensong. Cranmer's goal was to bring these services out of the monastery and into the parish in a form easily accessible to everyone.

Today we gather on a holy day of the church calendar. Even though we are still in the season of Christmas, we are wearing white stoles and cinctures because today is "The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ." In other words, today is the day our Lord was named. Although that might not seem like a big deal now when most babies are named long before they are born, it was a big deal in ancient Judea. A male child such as Jesus was given his name on his eighth day, when, according to Leviticus, he was circumcised. Before the revision to the prayer book, today was not known as "The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ," but as "The Circumcision of Our Lord."

I really can't blame the revisors of the prayer book for changing the name. After all, the prayer book is meant to be a living document, helping us to express our communal and private prayers, rather than embedding them in Elizabethan English. I suspect that there are other reasons for changing the name of this day as well. Circumcision is just not a topic which lends itself to joyous celebration. Marcia worked in the neonatology or new born section of a hospital, which included assisting the physicians during circumcisions of baby boys. She once told me that she never assisted a circumcision where the baby did not scream his lungs out. I asked her about this recently to confirm my recollection, and she added that they always screamed themselves red.

But remembering events such as the circumcision or naming of Jesus is fundamental to our faith. Almost every Sunday – except those when we gather for Morning Prayer – when we celebrate Holy Eucharist we remember at our Lord's institution the meal he shared with his friends the night he was betrayed. During Lent we recall our Lord's temptation, and of course on Good Friday we recall his crucifixion and death. Our remembering the events of Christ's life, whether his circumcision or death, is at the heart of Christianity.

However, we don't just recall these occurrences as historical events devoid of any context. We remember them in light of Christ's resurrection. Historical events which otherwise would be

unbearable to recall – *e.g.*, the betrayal and cruel execution of Jesus – are transformed and made holy through God’s redeeming act of raising Christ from the dead. We remember the worst thing we ever did – crucify the Lord – as the best thing that ever happened to us because God transformed it through the resurrection. We see everything in that happened in Christ’s life through the template of the resurrection. And I think that this tells us more than just how we are to recall the life of Christ; I believe that it also informs us how God remembers us.

Scripture is notoriously vague about the details of our ultimate destiny – images of pearly gates and winged angels strumming harps derive from sources other than the Bible – but it does assure us that we were created for communion with God, and that nothing, including death, can separate us from the love of God. So “being held in God’s memory” is just another way of trying to describe our ultimate destiny. I don’t mean just that God recalls our lives, as we remember those who have gone before us, but that we are held safe and loved by God until the promised return of his son. And just as we recall our Lord’s earthly life in the light of God’s raising him, God loves us and keeps us safe in his memory not as we were or might be now, but as he means us to be. I believe that the true vision God holds of us, the picture of each one of us which God has on his heavenly refrigerator, is a picture of each one of us when we have been transformed by the love of his Son.

I’m not just mouthing some theological blather on a quiet Sunday morning here. I believe that this is a truth which we can perceive in our lives through the grace of God. When Marcia and I were raising our oldest daughter Jessica she and I fought like the proverbial cats and dogs. Try to think of a metaphor for unresolvable differences – oil and water, frick and frack (my mother’s favorite) – and that doesn’t start to describe the situation. Jessica and I could not agree on anything. But the grace of God never stopped working on me, transforming me through the love of his Son as incarnate in communities such as this parish, our diocese, and the fellowship of believers. So now when I remember those days, besides being somewhat embarrassed that I was such a jerk, I see myself and Jessica as I think God might see us. I see the potential for love and grace which God always sees in all of us, the picture of us God has on his refrigerator.

Today we celebrate New Year’s Day, which is really just a trick of the calendar. It takes the earth about 365 days to revolve around the sun, and somebody decided that a new revolution would start on this date. There’s nothing intrinsically “new” about the New Year. But when Jesus declares in the Revelation to John “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5), he’s not just talking about starting a new revolution around the sun, or buds popping out on the trees during Spring, or even restoring creation to God’s original intentions. I believe that he means that he makes *all things* new, including our past, even our sorrows and losses. There’s an old saying that “Not even God can change the past,” but I believe that he can do more than that – he can transform the past through loving us more into the life of his Son, just as he transformed the crucifixion through the resurrection. My prayer for everyone here this morning is that *everything* in your lives is made new as you all grow in the knowledge and love of our Lord through the new year. Amen.