

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of *our* hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, *our* strength and *our* Redeemer. *Amen.*

Happy first day of the first month of the new year!

That wasn't very concise, was it? Well, what we're doing here today isn't as concise as usual, and certainly it's not routine. Our annual observance of this day of new beginnings finds us in church only once in every seven years. Normally on this first Sunday after Christmas in our lectionary year B, the Gospel lesson would come from the first chapter of John, "In the beginning was the word..." Here at St. Francis we would be looking forward to a potluck lunch after our second service, electing new folks to serve on the Vestry, and wrapping up the previous year through the reports of our annual meeting. But not today.

Today we observe the Feast of the Holy Name of our Lord. Some of us have heard most of today's Gospel lesson from Luke for the third time now in a week; it was part of our Christmas Gospel lesson, and though it may make us feel like we're in a time warp, it reminds us that we're still observing the season of Christmas. Christmas, New Year's, Annual Meeting, Holy Name—these are all identifiers, names that connect us to their meaning. When I said "happy first day of the first month of the New Year," it just didn't seem right to our ears. When we hear someone say "Happy New Year!" on the other hand, we understand the greeting without even thinking about it. Names are like that, too.

When our son Dan was eight years old, looking forward to going to camp for the first time, he came to me one day—only a week before he was to leave—and told me he didn't want to be called Dan anymore. So much for the personalized name tags I had purchased to put in all his clothes! I asked him what he wanted to be called. His first name is Richard, and I could see he was thinking that might be it, but since there were several other Richards in our lives, I thought one more would be too confusing. So we talked about it, and he settled on R.D., the initials of his first and middle names. We labeled everything—and I mean everything—with his name, R. D. Griffin, and off to camp he went. Two weeks later, when we went to pick him up, I noticed that everyone was calling him Dan, so I asked his counselor about it. It seems that R.D. had lasted for only a few days. He thought of himself as Dan, and that was the name that caused him to stop, and listen, and respond. For eight years he had been raised as Dan, the name given him at birth by his parents, although only *we* knew the hopes and dreams we had for this child we were calling Dan.

I've heard that this desire a child has to change his name is not uncommon, and I wonder if Jesus ever went to Mary and Joseph to tell them he wanted to change his name... Like most babies, Jesus was named before he was ever born. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia at [NewAdvent.org](http://NewAdvent.org), "the word Jesus is the Latin form" of a Greek name with a slightly different spelling, "which in turn is the translation of the Hebrew name 'Jeshua,' or 'Joshua,' or 'Jehoshua,' all variations that mean 'Jehovah is salvation.'" The name appears frequently in the Old Testament, but no one of prominence in scripture was so named after the days of the Joshua we remember from the story of the Exodus.

In Hebrew, the name Jesus means "Savior" or "Deliverer." We can trace the implications of that meaning all the way back to the Prophet Isaiah, in words we heard at our Christmas services: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Terrific responsibilities for a little kid to grow into! But for those who expected his appearance, who heard the good news about his birth, the name "Jesus" was full of promise for what the future would bring because of him. For us, who live after his life and death, the name "Jesus" still brings promise; but it also brings blessings and grace. In the sixteenth chapter of John, we're assured that God will grant whatever we ask in Jesus' name. As Christians, that's exactly how we ask; we pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And our prayers are not just empty requests. They're filled with hope and expectation because we believe in Jesus as the Son of God and we believe that Jesus lived into everything implied by the name that was given him.

Although we've always set aside the first day of January as a feast day to remember when Mary and Joseph took their newborn son to the temple, observing this day as the Feast of the Holy Name of our Lord is fairly new in the Episcopal Church. Until our current Book of Common Prayer came into use, it was called the Feast of the Circumcision. Like all observant Jews, Jesus' parents took him to the temple on the appropriate day—not only to be named, but also to be circumcised. This was important because it marked the parents' obedience to the law that had been instituted by Moses; but according to scholars of ancient cultural practices, it also signified the father's acceptance of a child as his own, as well as the father's acceptance of his own paternal responsibility for the child, responsibility taken without his knowing anything of the child's character or what the child would become. It was a momentous day and a festive event. The ceremony was an occasion for family and friends to come together to witness the naming of the child.

As Christians we don't follow the ancient law of circumcision. But our own tradition of baptizing infants connects us to the rite of circumcising and naming the child. In baptism, an infant is named and the parents and sponsors assume responsibility for the child's religious and spiritual upbringing. Adults who are baptized also are sponsored by persons who agree to support the spiritual life of the newly baptized. In baptism, we are received into the household of God, indicating God's acceptance and responsibility for us, God's own children, who are marked as Christ's own forever, and named to be Christian by human parents and sponsors who promise to support our growth in faith.

Named to be Christian. For people who follow Christ, could there be a more important name than that? It's what we all call ourselves. It's an essential part of the way we identify ourselves and one another, but what does it really mean? For starters, of course, it means that we revere the name of Jesus; we celebrate his name with a feast day set aside for that purpose. There is more to it than that, but how do we define it? By the way we live? By our membership in a church? Through our heritage?

Philip Gulley, a Quaker minister and author, tells a story about a woman who phoned to ask if he would officiate at her wedding. Before he could explain his protocol for weddings, she hurriedly informed him that she was Christian. "Oh, what church do you attend?" he asked. "I've never really gone to church," she said. "Did you mean to say that Jesus is your Savior?" Gulley asked her. "I don't think so," she said. His curiosity growing, Gulley continued to question her. "What do you mean, then, when you say you're a Christian?" The woman replied, "I guess what I meant is that my grandmother goes to church and I grew up in America." Gulley notes that he didn't pursue it any further, but says that since then he has heard the same sentiment echoed by others. He says that "The criteria for Christian faith now seems to be 'if I say I am a Christian, I am.'"

Does simply being named Christian identify who we are? No, of course it doesn't; or at least it shouldn't. Is it about what we believe? Or the way we live? Or the way we act? It's about all those and more, but it's up to each of us individually to define what that means for us personally. This day when we celebrate the occasion of Jesus' circumcision and naming, when we celebrate what Jesus' name means to us, also gives us the perfect opportunity to explore how the name "Christian" identifies us. Today we have reason to reflect on how our faith and belief in his holy name finds honor in our lives, not just on Sunday, but every day of the week. And with today's uncommon convergence of old traditions and new beginnings, we find the perfect opportunity to determine how to live thoughtfully and fully into our beliefs, to give honor to his holy name, each and every day of the year.

Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ. And help us, dear Lord, to bear witness to him. *Amen.*