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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 1, 2023

Holy Name, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary

[Numbers 6:22-27](#)

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

[Luke 2:15-21](#)

[Psalm 8](#)

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The data are in. 2022 has officially come to an end. And we have an answer to the big question:

What were the most popular baby names in America this past year?

According to BabyCenter.com, the most popular names were Olivia for girls and Liam for boys. 25 years ago in 1997 the most popular names were Emily and Michael. Fifty years ago it was Jennifer and Michael, and one hundred years ago the most popular names were Mary and John.

We've come a long way from Mary and John to Olivia and Liam! We might guess that in a hundred years we've moved from valuing simple, one-syllable names associated with saints to names with a little more flair and individualism. Names tell us something about the way our culture has changed over time. They tell us who the important celebrities have been and what ethnic heritages have been significant.

Our names matter so much: maybe you know a family story about what your name means or how your parents chose it for you. In some ways they make us who we are. And yet in another way, of course, a name is totally arbitrary. As Juliet says in the Shakespeare play, what's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

It's something like the way we measure time. Today is New Year's Day. This particular sunrise and sunset marks the beginning of a whole new year, full of all the promise that 2023 may bring. And yet of course there's nothing significant about this particular day in itself. We could choose to mark the New Year in late January, as in Chinese New Year, or in March the way the ancient Romans used to. It's not so much about which day we choose as the fact that we have to choose a day, because we need to count. We have to have a way to mark the passages of our lives. And so even though we could pick any day in the calendar, we pick this one, and we say: *here* the year begins. And so the ball drops in Times Square and our society celebrates New Year's Day.

We're celebrating another occasion today as well, because it is on the first of January that our church calendar celebrates the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. It just happens that the secular New Year is also the eighth day after Christmas. And it's on the eighth day after birth, both then and now, that a male Jewish child is circumcised, and is officially given his name.

It doesn't get much more specific or particular than a name. Names are what make reality intelligible, what make things unique and individualized. Give something a name and you can think about it, talk about it, know it. Names have power in lots of civilizations and myths ... think of the Harry Potter books in which the villain, Lord Voldemort, is so powerful and feared that his name is never spoken aloud. And our names are in a way what make us human.

Concentration camps and totalitarian regimes are famous for taking people's names away and referring to them by numbers—a way of dehumanizing. Calling one another by name is a way of honoring our humanity. When I worked in hospice chaplaincy our patients were given medical record numbers for the purposes of our computer databases—but we would never refer to them Patient Number 492738. We called them by name.

In the Old Testament, and in Jewish tradition to this present day, the name of God given to Moses at Sinai is considered too sacred to be spoken aloud—so much so that a reader substitutes the word Adonai, which means Lord, whenever the divine name appears in the text. But today God in human form gets a name. An ordinary name, one that was as common in first-century Israel as Aiden is today or John and Mary were a hundred years ago. The word is made flesh, and his name is Jesus.

Maybe you've watched the Monty Python comedy *The Life of Brian*. It centers on an ordinary fellow named Brian who grows up in the same village as Jesus and in a case of mistaken identity ends up hailed as Messiah. Imagine if our Christian profession of faith had ended up not as “Jesus is Lord!” but as “Brian is Lord!” It sounds ridiculous—and yet it might as well have been Brian, really. It was an ordinary, everyday name. And for us it has become the name of God in human form. How radical it is that we can talk this way! Jesus is Lord! The eternal, almighty, transcendent God, has shown up in human history with a single name. It could have been anything else. But it wasn't. And so for Christians this single person is the definitive image of what God is like. Do you want to know ... what God cares about? what makes God angry? how God relates to people? how God treats women? how God wants people to act? what God's attitude is about the poor? how God responds to suffering and injustice? how God responds to death? *Look at Jesus*. In this human personality we have the perfect image of God's personality. And the more we hear the stories of who this human being is, the more we come to realize that this is good news about God indeed.