

Sermon ✝ January 1, 2023

Luke 2:15-21

Frank Maxwell

On the church calendar, today, January 1st is The Name of Jesus Day. It's an obscure festival that dates back to the sixth century. It was introduced relatively late because the church did not want it to be mixed with a secular day,

It was an important custom . . . that of naming. Jesus is the English translation of the Greek which is translated from Aramaic which is translated from Hebrew. In Aramaic and Hebrew, the name is Yeshua. It was a common name in New Testament times. It means salvation — the Lord will save.

Names, especially in Biblical times were much more than just a mere label of identification. They were the expression of the essential nature of its bearer.

Milton tells us in his famous work, *Paradise Lost*, that Adam was able to give names to the beasts and birds because he understood their nature. One's name was identical with one's existence.

To be given someone's name is to be considered as belonging to that someone. To speak in someone's name is to participate in that person's character and authority.

With all of this in mind, to have the Lord's name put on us is indeed an awesome thing. We are baptized in His name. We meet together in His name. We pray and receive others in His name.

For those who participate in the Christian community, this name—Jesus—is most important.

How do we use names today? What thought goes into the names we give our children? Do we use beloved family members or friend's names? Favorite movie stars or performers? When we lived in Bayfield County in the 1970's, a local teacher delivered his child in the back seat of a Volkswagen Beetle in the Chequamegon Forest. They named their child Chequamegon Flower.

The names of the products we buy are important:

Cars: LeBaron, Monte Carlo, Cordoba, LeMans

After shave: Brut, English leather

Perfume: Sheer Innocence, Whisper

Generic products don't 'Sell all that well. We like to buy a product that we can believe in.

To have a meaningful name and to believe in it are important.

Civil War historian, Bruce Catton, tells us that Gen. George B. McClellan, commander of the northern Army of the Potomac, had a difficult time believing in his name. In his book, "The Army of the Potomac: Mr. Lincoln's Army", Catton says that McClellan had the unquestioned loyalty of his soldiers. They would endure any deprivation, hardship, or test if McClellan gave them the word. They believed in him. In a sense, we could say that the troop's name for him was also, "He will save."

The problem was that McClellan had crippling doubts about the name his men gave him. Catton says that it was as if some invisible rider would come up to McClellan's side and torment him with the thought, "But General, are you sure?" This was McClellan's tragedy: he could never believe in the name given him. So he hesitated at crucial moments of military judgement and never fulfilled the promise that his soldiers saw in him.

A good name is important for us to have. It is equally important for us to trust in our God name. Our name is, as our baptism says, "Child of God." The name of Jesus should be the most important to us.

We have given so many names to Jesus: Son of God, Son of Man, Emmanuel, King of Kings, Shepherd, brother, friend, way, truth, life. But we live in a society that often makes it difficult to use his name.

We are often bound by a spirit of this age which makes whole, constructive trends of thinking impossible except by outside intervention. Jesus came to us at Christmas time. He was, is, and can be that kind of intervention.

The name of Jesus is for many the central theme of both their devotion and thought. We must take care so as not to hide behind the name of Jesus. Yes, Jesus saves, but salvation involves change in our environment and in our inner attitude and our value system. It is up to each of us to live a life worthy of our name as children of God. It is up to us to actively respond to the needs of our sisters and brothers. It is up to us to see that all we do, we do it in the name of Jesus.

This is a special day. We celebrate the Name of Jesus. His name has a special meaning for us. For us—believing, practicing, sinning Christians.

It is also the beginning of a New Year today—a new calendar year—the year by which we are made older—the year: a tool in which births and deaths are recorded—the year by which we are taxed.

The church, however, is bigger than the ordinary calendar year. The name of Jesus transcends that which is devised by humans. Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, our sibling, our friend—this we celebrate.

I wish you the best in this new calendar year, but even more I wish you the blessings of the Name of Jesus.