

Feast Day of the Holy Name

How did you get your name? Did your parents select your name to honor another family member, to carry on a lineage? Perhaps your mother was fond of a particular movie star or just liked the way the name sounded. In the decade I was born, Pamela was the 14th most popular name for a girl. I was beat out by Mary, Susan, Linda, Lisa, Karen, Donna, Deborah, Cynthia and Patricia. Supposedly Pamela is of Greek origin and means sweetness or honey.

I've never had children so I haven't been faced with the heavy responsibility of appending a moniker to another individual. In my household it's always fallen to Greg to name our four-legged family members and I don't think it's ever taken him more than 20 seconds to land upon an appropriate appellation.

Parents-to-be, on the other hand, seem to ponder, weigh, debate and even agonize over their new baby's name during the full nine months of pregnancy – Should grandparents names be included? Will the name subject the child to ridicule in the school yard? Will it “fit” the child as he or she grows? We've all witnessed the lengths to which many parents will go to ensure their child's name out-uniques every other baby born that year. Sometimes I can't help but shake my head when reading the birth announcements in the paper – you've just gotta pity all of those elementary teachers who'll be trying to take attendance with those kids in the class. The days of Mary, Susan, Linda, Lisa, Karen, Donna and Deborah seem to be long gone.

Names have always been important throughout history: They told people who your kin were or where you lived or what your family's occupation was. In a variety of cultures through the centuries – from Celtic to Arabic to Chinese – your name was a literal roadmap of your ancestry. First names often reflected parents' hopes for their child. Of course, many children were named after bible figures and saints, hence there were a lot of young girls called Elizabeth, Abigail and Theresa. Other names that seem commonplace to us today were originally conjunctions of words that, when combined, revealed parental aspirations. For example, the name “Albert” is of Germanic origin – the “al” comes from a word meaning noble, while

“bert” is rooted in the word for bright. Bright noble. Robert, on the other hand, translates to “Bright fame”

Surnames became a necessity -- as clans, tribes and towns grew -- in order to distinguish one individual from another. Soon we had John of the Hill and John of the Marsh and John the Weaver as well as John the Smithy. Then there was John, Robert’s son and the other John, Richard’s son. Meanwhile, the Coopers made barrels, the Sawyers cut trees into lumber and the Millers crushed grain into flour. For centuries, people’s names were a direct link to their identity – we knew important details about their lives, merely by knowing their names. Now, many generations later, we -- their descendents -- have virtually no connection to our own names and they reveal nothing about our true identities. The Fullers aren’t clothmakers, the Tanners don’t work with leather and the Masons aren’t bricklayers. In the 21st century, our names really say nothing about us.

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Today we celebrate the Feast Day of the Holy Name – the day Jesus officially received his name. The gospels tell us that his earthly parents didn’t have to fret one bit about what to name their son. According to Luke, the Angel Gabriel told Mary her baby’s name at the Annunciation. According to Matthew, that information was given to Joseph during his visit with an angel. Either way, the Christ child’s parents knew God’s chosen name for their son before he was born.

The name “Jesus” is a highly Hellenized version of the Christ’s real name as it was spoken in his lifetime. “Jesus” is how the Greeks translated the Hebrew name “Yeshua” – there is no “J” in Hebrew. [Incidentally, that’s also how “Yahweh” became “Jehovah.”] The meaning of his name translates essentially to “salvation” or “God saves.” Although Yeshua was a relatively common name, Jesus’ identity was clear from the beginning.

Today is also the Feast Day of the Circumcision – the feast days run concurrent because, in centuries of Jewish tradition, the male child is circumcised on the 8th day of his birth and at that time is formally given his name.

And what an important name it is! Jesus' name tells us he's our savior, sent by God from heaven to be born in human likeness and walk this earth with us – to live, to die and to be raised up – ALL for our benefit. The holy name of Jesus permeates our entire being as Christians: We pray in his name and we are blessed in his name. We are baptized, married and buried in his name. He is present at every moment of our lives and it is his name, his life which gives us our true identity as beloved children of our Creator. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son – his beloved son – to save the sorry rabble that's the rest of us. Why? Because we are so loved. Infinitely loved.

I remember not long after I started attending St. Mark's regularly, the Saturday morning women's group began reading Philip Yancey's book "What's So Amazing about Grace?" The book is over 300 pages long and is powerfully relevant for this day and age, but I can really only remember one passage from it – a passage that spoke to the core of my being. Essentially, it said: "There's nothing I can do to make God love me more and... there's nothing I can do to make God love me less."

Suddenly the abstract concept of grace – this theoretical idea of an unearned gift from God – became very real. There's nothing we can do to make God love us less. Despite our pathetic sinning selves, God loves us...unconditionally, passionately, infinitely. There's nothing we can do to make God love us more. Success or failure, hitting or missing the mark, God loves us. Unconditionally, passionately, infinitely. Every single one of us. All seven billion of us.

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So, on this day of new beginnings in this new year, as we celebrate the holy name of Jesus and his identity as our savior, let us go forth and celebrate with confidence and joy OUR identity as the beloved children of God. May the Lord continue to bless us and keep us. May the Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious to us. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace. AMEN.