

The Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, Year B
December 31, 2017
Luke 2:22-40

We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of God, full of grace and truth.

In these days between the nativity of Christ and the arrival of the three magi,
things were happening in the time of Jesus.

During these 12 days of Christmas,

I think of what it must have been like for the Holy Family
marking those first few days with their newborn child.

For those of you who have spent those early days with a new baby,
you know it's liminal time.

That new life represents so much for the family gathered;
hope, promise, exhaustion, peace.

It is a sweet thing indeed.

And every culture marks those first days with rituals and traditions
surrounding the baby and the mother in particular and intentional ways.

I remember those days with each of my own children well:

spending that time holding the child, learning their every cry,
figuring out their needs, and marveling at this new creation.

In this second chapter of Luke's gospel, both **ordinary and extraordinary** things are happening
which we are going to explore in depth.

The Holy Family; Mary, Joseph, and Jesus adhered to Jewish customs
and at the same time, the Holy Spirit was clearly on the move.

As expected and per Jewish custom,

Jesus is circumcised and named on the eighth day
before being presented in the Temple
when Mary went to perform her purification rites following childbirth.

For a moment, let us reflect upon the power of names and being named,
on this the naming day of Jesus.

Names are important.

The angel Gabriel told Mary and Joseph what the child would be named
and now the day has come.

He is Jesus. He is here.

And his name comes from the Hebrew form of *Joshua* meaning
"YHWH is salvation" or "YHWH saves."

His name foretells his mission and his destiny,

all bundled in the swaddling clothes of newborn child.

And Christ means Messiah.

So, here on his naming day, we have an infant, **the** infant,
named Jesus Christ, the Messiah who saves.

For us today, simply saying “Jesus” calls to mind no other,
but in his own day there were any number of boys running around by the name of Jesus.
So, to distinguish him from all the rest,
he was often referred to as “Jesus the Galilean”
or more often, “Jesus of Nazareth.”
He then became known as Jesus Christ,
thus binding together the historic figure of Jesus
with the messianic role and status that early Christian faith attributed to him.

The Holy Name of Jesus, given by God, through the messenger Gabriel the Angel,
and bestowed upon the child at this his naming day, captured in a word
a revolution that would turn humanity on its head and transform lives forever.

So, we have a child named, Jesus, the Messiah,
and the time has come for his family to make pilgrimage to the Temple
for their purification according to the law of Moses.

Tell the story:

*Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,
according to Jewish custom.*

*They offered a sacrifice as well, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons,
also according to Jewish custom.*

*Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;
this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel,
and the Holy Spirit rested on him.*

*It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death
before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.*

*Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple;
and when he saw Mary and Joseph holding the infant Jesus,
Simeon knew.*

He knew this child was the One.

He rushed over to them, took the child in his arms and praised God.

This entire sequence of events is carefully choreographed; from the naming to the presenting,
with Law and Holy Spirit working in concert to bring together these persons.

Now, remember, if you’ve traveled to Jerusalem and seen what’s left of the Temple,
you have a sense of what a vast area it was
covering nearly 35 acres of buildings and open courts in Jesus’ day.

It was **no coincidence**

that Simeon and a little later, Anna, bumped into the Holy Family
with their new baby that day.

It was God’s divine providence

that Jesus be recognized and claimed as the agent of salvation on sacred ground.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were there to fulfill religious obligations –
rites of purity, blessing, and sacrifice,

but what ends up happening is **profound and prophetic.**

Simeon takes the child in his arms and says to God:
*Lord, you now have set your servant free
To go in peace as you have promised.
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
Whom you have prepared for all the world to see;
A light to enlighten the nations,
And the glory of your people Israel.*

Simeon's prayer is familiar, right? We know it as the Song of Simeon.
It's in Hour by Hour and Compline.

The words come from the prophet Isaiah
and hearken to the old vision of the restoration of Israel,
a restoration that was to include the Gentiles.

And all this being said in the grounds of the Jewish Temple. It is deeply profound.

At some point, Simeon had come to know that he would not die until he had seen the Savior.
And for all these years, he had been fasting and praying on the grounds of the Temple.

Waiting, watching, praying...
But now, Simeon knows he can go in peace.
He has seen the Messiah, held the Messiah.
Jesus, our Salvation has come!

Mary and Joseph were amazed at this holy man and his words.

And then, Simeon blessed the Holy Family.
He blessed them while holding Jesus
and before returning the baby to his mother,
he looked at Mary and said,
"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel,
and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed
– and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Extraordinary, and yet it wasn't over.

As the prophet Simeon's words hung in the air, an old woman approached them –
a holy woman, a woman of prayer.

Her name is Anna and she is the only woman in the New Testament referred to as a prophet.

She was widowed at a young age and never remarried,
instead, she moved to the temple
where she worshipped with fasting and prayer night and day.

At that moment, as the Holy Family stood there absorbing Simeon's words and blessing,
she came to them, and began to praise God and to speak about the child
to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

On that sacred ground in this liminal time between the birth of Christ
and the adoration of the magi,
ordinary and extraordinary things wove together
in a delicate dance of Law and Holy Spirit
to foretell the story of salvation that was to unfold
in this astonishing person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.