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New Year's at Bethlehem

It's not often that New Year's Day lands on a Sunday. But here we are: the few, the brave, the faithful. Actually, we already celebrated the beginning of the new year about a month ago on the first Sunday of Advent. We Episcopalians, along with our Catholic and Lutheran friends, follow a different way of marking time than the rest of our culture.

Advent always points us to Christmas and Christmas always points us to the beginning point of our creation and salvation story—the very moment that God named himself as human and decided to live and dwell among us so that we might know God by name. If we look at the seasons of Advent and Christmas as a whole we are invited into a magnificent spiritual drama characterized by waiting, attending, seeking, and ultimately welcoming anew the presence of God into our midst.

Let's try to ponder, for a moment, like Mary, that point in the original story in Bethlehem when all of the initial excitement of the birth of Jesus had died down. The angels and the shepherds have all gone home and the parents, Joseph and Mary, with the newborn baby are trying to make sense of what had happened to them. Think of time when a major life event has occurred in your life. Can you remember feeling disoriented, confused, anxious, afraid and excited—all at the same time?

Even if the birth of a child occurs in a high tech and comfortable hospital there is still that moment that nearly every parent has when he or she becomes speechless because of the miracle that has just occurred before them and the overwhelming sense of responsibility of becoming new parents. It is such an odd mixture of excitement and apprehension—all right maybe even terror—but most of all an incredible time of stepping out in faith and yes, of not being in control! When our daughter Rachel was born right here at Overlake Hospital, I remember looking at my wife Jannie, on the day of discharge, saying, "You mean the nurses don't come home with us!"

In today's gospel story, it is eight days after the birth of Jesus, and Mary and Joseph are still trying to put a name to what has just happened to them and to name this incredible son of theirs. They had gotten some help from God through a visit from an angel. His name was to be Jesus. His mission was our salvation. He was God but he would have a human face. As was the Jewish custom, on the eighth day following his birth, Jesus was taken to the temple by his parents Mary and Joseph for the rite of initiation known as circumcision. The rite of circumcision symbolized the establishment of a special relationship or covenant with God in a way much like our rite of baptism. It is the way we say we officially belong to God and to each other. It is a relationship in which we and God are known by name.

During this highly secular day and age in which we live it is easy to miss the mystery and reverence that the ancient Christians originally associated with calling God by name and turning to him for help, guidance, and strength. This reverence for the holiness of God's name is preserved in the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "Hallowed be His name."

But what makes the name of God holy is more than the word. It is the intent behind the word. While our society might shame us for turning to God in vulnerability, true holiness is created every time we turn to God with absolute trust that He will come to help us and to save us. Most of us have had the experience of turning to God in times of great anxiety and fear and have offered the most powerful prayer that we can offer to God when we simply say the one-word prayer "Jesus."

This is all that is needed to begin intimate and honest communication with God. It is a great way to begin the new year. Sometimes we say Jesus' name softly and sometimes we say it loudly—sometimes reverently and sometimes profanely. As many of you know, my Church office is directly across from the 17th hole of the Overlake golf course—I hear a lot of golfers use the name of Jesus—some of them might even be praying! But the most beautiful way of all is to sing Jesus' name. No matter how we serve it up to God, when we pray or sing the simple word "Jesus" good things begin to happen.

Just the other night while enjoying a spectacular performance of Handel's Messiah at Benaroya Hall, I felt the power of Jesus' name whose light is brighter than any trial or tribulation we may be experiencing in our lives. Sitting next to my

wife Jannie and I were two good friends who has just lost a child due to a miscarriage. Their sadness was palpable and yet the soothing music of the evening did its magic. The chorus' singing penetrated our hearts as we heard the hopeful words, "For us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of peace."

Later that night I learned of the Seattle Symphony's amazing program that partners with several organizations in the Seattle area that work with the homeless. The symphony's mission is for their musicians to form relationships with residents of various shelters and give them a chance to learn instruments, make music, and eventually to co-produce concerts together.

What a great idea! It an incredibly creative example of how diverse people can be brought together to lift the human spirit and to help others to be known by name, and to help the Christ Child be known by name. I believe this is what it means to welcome the newborn king into our hearts and celebrate the true miracle of Christmas.

I am reminded of the stirring words of Howard Thurman, "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the Work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart."

On this occasion of the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus let us remember the name that is above all other names. Let us remember that each time we say, "Jesus" it is an act of faith, love, and service. Let us make our New Year's resolutions to each other and to God: to keep saying, singing and praying the name of Jesus until we are delivered from all that troubles us, filled with a peace and joy that uplifts us, and strengthen by a faith that makes our burdens light and our spirits right. The manger is the perfect place to begin a new year! Amen.