

**Sermon for Morning Prayer:
The Second Sunday after Christmas¹**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest in Charge

The Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of Micah.³

“But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

“And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it. For all people will walk every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.

“...

“... But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah⁴ [**BETH-lee-hem EPP-rath-uh**], though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel.

“And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.⁵

“... And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord; (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;) And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons. And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “When eight days were accomplished for the circumcision of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

⁵ St. Luke 2:21-32 (KJV).

⁶ St. Luke 2:21 (RSV).

Homily:

Actually it was God the Father who gave Jesus His Name. The angel was simply the messenger. The significant thing is that Jesus was born with a name already given, and it was not Mary and Joseph who gave it to him.

To name something, you see, is to define it, and when you define something you set limits and boundaries. That is why the name of God cannot be known. He has no limits. He has no boundaries. He identifies Himself to Moses simply as THE ONE WHO IS.

When we assign a name to God, we claim a measure of control over Him. That is not simply presumptuous, it is blasphemous. Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." He taught us to call God FATHER, which is not a name but an indication of a certain relationship. Like a father God gives us life. Like a father God watches over us. Like a father God implants some of His own nature within us.

Names, in the Bible, are always conferred on those for whom someone accepts responsibility. Adam, for instance, gave names to the animals as well as to his wife. A name change indicates a change in identity or destiny. God changed the name of Abram to Abraham and the name of Jacob to Israel when He assigned each of them a new status. Jesus gave the name PETER to a disciple formerly known as SIMON. SAUL OF TARSUS became known as PAUL when he was transformed from an enemy of Christ to an Apostle.

Since it was God the Father who gave Jesus His name, it was the Father who defined the mission of his Son before He was born, and indeed before He was even conceived in the Virgin's womb. It was by carrying out that mission that Jesus attained the highest possible honor.

Jesus was well aware of His destiny. When He saw His death approaching He said, “Now it my soul troubled. And what shall I say, ‘Father save me from this hour?’ No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.”

St Paul says, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Again he says of Jesus, “Being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.”

You and I were given names and a mission when we were baptized. That mission is expressed in these words from the Prayer Book rite: “We receive this child into the congregation of Christ’s flock and do sign him with the sign of the cross, in token that hereafter he will not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil; and to continue Christ’s faithful soldier and servant unto his life’s end.”

We have all tried to bear those names with honor in this world because we know that they represent our identity as children of God. Some of us have been better at that than others. Some of us have also come closer than others to fulfilling our baptismal commission. But the book of Revelation assures us that one day God will give us new names. “To him who conquers,” he says, “I will give a white stone with a new name written on the stone, which no one knows except him who receives it.” That new name will indicate a new identity, a new nature. And that name, which is revealed further on in the book, is the name that means “God is salvation” or “God sets free.”

It is the name JESUS.

The cross that was imposed on our foreheads when we were baptized is invisible now, but one day will be made manifest

for all to see. Those who reverence that sign will also reverence us, just as we now reverence each other because we all bear the name and sign of JESUS.

There is an old hymn that goes like this:

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
Every Tongue confess him King of Glory now.
‘Tis the Father’s pleasure we should call him Lord,
Who from the beginning was the mighty Word.
Humbled for a season to receive a name.
From the lips of sinners unto whom he came.
Faithfully he bore it, spotless to the last,
Brought it back victorious when from death he passed.
Bore it up triumphant with its human light,
Through all ranks of creatures to the central height,
To the throne of Godhead, to the Father’s breast,
Filled it with the glory of that perfect rest.

Those lines, which are in our hymnal, capture something of the significance of this text from the gospel: “When eight days were accomplished for the circumcision of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

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St. David’s Anglican Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

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¹ This sermon was delivered at Mass on the Observance of the Feast of the Circumcision, for which the Gospel appointed is the same as the Second Lesson at Morning Prayer on Christmas II.

² THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Micah 4: 1-5, 5:2-4 (KJV).

⁴ Another name for Bethlehem or the area immediately surrounding it. PAUL J. ACHEMEIER, HARPER’S BIBLE DICTIONARY (HarperSanFrancisco 1985), s.v. “Ephrathah”.