

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Second Sunday after Christmasⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

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

“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 Ephratah^{iv} [**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.^v

“... 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: “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.”^{vi} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

A person’s name is very important to the Jewish way of understanding things. Knowledge of a name gives one access to that person’s character. When Jacob had wrestled all night with the angel, he said, “Tell me your name.” When God manifested Himself to Moses in the burning bush and commissioned him to deliver Israel from bondage in Egypt, Moses said that the people would want to know *the Name* of God, who was sending him to them. They wanted to know of God’s

character and purpose. So God said to Moses, “I AM that I AM... Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.”^{vii}

Sometimes a name will change. A change of name signifies a change of identity and character. A change of name points to a new mission in life in which one is caught up into God’s plan and purpose in a new way. A woman changes her family name when she marries. She assumes her husband’s identity, character and purpose. He in turn “covers” her with his love. When God called Abram into a covenant, Abram became Abraham. Jacob became Israel after wrestling with the angel. Saul became Paul after his conversion. Simon became Peter after confessing Jesus as the Christ.

The name is given, for Jewish boys, at the time of circumcision, eight days after birth. That is when one is made a member of the covenant with Abraham, that through Abraham God would bless all the nations of the earth. Jesus’ Name was announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel, when he announced to her that she would, by the Holy Spirit, conceive the world’s long-awaited Redeemer. Through her “Yes,” the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. His Name, Jesus, given on the day of His circumcision, is in Hebrew, “Joshua,” “Yeshua,” meaning “He who saves, He who delivers, He who brings Israel over the Jordan into the Promised Land”.

Jesus is circumcised according to the Law to show His obedience to the Law, to redeem those under the Law. He shows that obedience to the Father is the way forward for all of us. He is not only faithful to the Law; He is the faithful Israelite *par excellence*. At every point where Israel failed, Jesus undid that failure by going through the same experience and “doing it right.” He recapitulated all Israel’s experience in His own person. Israel’s long series of “nays” to God were undone by Mary’s “yes.”

Israel’s trembling at the first possibility of crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land was countered by Jesus’ going boldly to the River Jordan for baptism. Israel’s failure in the wilderness was unraveled by Jesus’ faithfulness when tempted by Satan in the desert. Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden was undone by

Jesus' obedience to the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemene. As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience, death enters into their experience. Jesus, on the other hand, goes through death and undoes it from within and abolishes it. Whereas Adam's offspring go down to their grave, the Second Adam has risen from the dead and ascended to the Father's side, exalted to the highest place. In Christ, man with God is on the throne. Our humanity has been raised to *that* height; we are united with Jesus in Baptism and Holy Communion; we are united with Him Whose Name is above all other names, the Name Jesus, before whom every knee must bow.

There is power in the Name of Jesus. Some years ago, in 1983, President Reagan proclaimed the year of the Bible. Many thousands of Bibles were given out all across the country. More people in our nation were attending to the Word of God. The Name of Jesus was being lifted up. Various social commentators noticed that during 1983, the rate of crime and divorce dropped. There is power in the Name of Jesus.

Use the Holy Name in time of temptation. The Fathers used to say that, "With the Name of Jesus, flog the foes." The Fathers taught the Jesus Prayer, to be repeated reverently over and over again: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." When the enemy sees us attentive in prayer, calling out to our Lord, Jesus Christ, he retreats in shame. When it comes your time to die, call out to the Lord with the Jesus Prayer. Use the Holy Name in adoration, as we kneel before Him in the Blessed Sacrament and say, "My Lord and my God."

In the Liturgy, all our petitions, confessions, intercessions and thanksgivings are sent up to the Father, through the holy Name of Jesus. We end our prayers with the words, "through Jesus Christ our Lord." He is the One Who opens up access to the Father. And so the Liturgy is addressed *to* the Father, *through* the Son, *in* the Holy Spirit. It is Jesus who gives us boldness of access to the throne of grace. He has flung open heaven's gates. In Him heaven and earth have been united. All our imperfect prayers are passed through His nail-scarred hands and made part of His perfect prayer. There is power in the Name of Jesus!

Our battle is in the spiritual realm. It is the Holy Spirit Who inspires us to confess the Name of Jesus, the Name that cannot be

defeated. That is the Name on the martyr's lips, the Name on the lips of Stephen, the deacon and first martyr, whose feast we celebrated last Monday, as he forgave his murderers. That is the Name proclaimed by those multitudes of Christians in Nigeria who are being murdered in Church on Sunday mornings by Muslims. "The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still," wrote Martin Luther.

Jesus is the Name that conquers death and hell, the Name above all other names. "There is none other name given among men by which we must be saved." He is the Word of God, the two-edged Sword, the Bright and Morning Star, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Alpha and Omega, Creator of the Universe, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Rose of Sharon, Good Shepherd, Joy of Man's Desiring, Delight of Every Soul, the Door of the Sheep, the Great I AM, Man of Sorrows, Saviour, Lord, Messiah, Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Ruler of the kings of the earth, Bridegroom and Head of the Church, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth, Priest and Victim, our great High Priest. There is power in the Name of Jesus!

You have His Name. His Bride the Church takes His Name just as a bride takes her husband's name. You were given His Name in Baptism, when you were united with Him in His death and Resurrection. You were united with Him in His victory, united with Him in all the power of His Name. We are overcomers in the Blood of the Lamb. We have victory over all the powers of death and hell in that Name. When you confess Jesus Christ as Lord, nations stand in awe, mountains have to move, demons have to flee, and above all, hearts have to change. Cold, stony hearts become hearts of flesh that throb and beat for the glory of the living God, hearts that can love again.

And so, in the Collect for the Circumcision, we pray for hearts that are mortified. Mortification in the baptized life is the circumcision of the Spirit about which the Old Testament writes. The circumcision of the flesh was for the Jew a sacrament and pre-figuring of the true circumcision of the Spirit. This is the death of the old Adam in us, to give way to the new Adam. We are to die to worldly and carnal lusts, so that we can be alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. John the Baptist pointed to this when he said, "I must decrease so that He can

increase.” St. Paul said, “For me to live is Christ,” and “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

We have His Name. He gave it to us. It is the Holy Spirit who imparts this new reality, this new identity, character and purpose, such that we are, with Jesus’ Name, caught up into the very Heart of the Father. As you assist at the Liturgy, keep your ears open for every mention of the Holy Spirit, who is the One who exalts the Name of Jesus, who inspires us to lift up the Name of Jesus and bear witness to Him. At the Eucharist, as Jesus is lifted up during the Prayer of Consecration, and just before Communion, look up and adore Him. Re-consecrate your whole life to Him, that you may belong to Him from head to toe, bearers and proclaimers of His holy Name, that you may be His in all you think and say and do. May we, in this year of Grace, grow in union with His inner life, and look forward to the new name we shall receive in heaven when we will see Him face to face. Amen.

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The Rt. Rev’d Paul C. Hewett, SSC^{viii}
January 1, 2012

ⁱ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the Circumcision, 2012.

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Micah 4: 1-5, 5:2-4* (KJV).

^{iv} Another name for Bethlehem or the area immediately surrounding it. PAUL J. ACHTEMEIER, *HARPER’S BIBLE DICTIONARY* (HarperSanFrancisco 1985), s.v. “Ephrathah”.

^v *St. Luke 2:21-32* (KJV).

^{vi} *St. Luke 2:21* (KJV).

^{vii} *Exodus 3:14* (KJV).

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