



1st Sunday of Christmas
“The Power of Name”
January 1, 2012

*Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it O Lord,
that in hearing Your Word, Your Name may be forever on our lips and in our hearts. Amen.*

One of my favorite movies in recent years is an animated movie called “Over the Hedge”. The movie is about a group of animals that live in the woods as a community. They awake from a recent winter hibernation, only to discover their environment has changed. Where there had once been woods for them to live and gather food, there now exists something big, something never before there, and something green.

This “big green thing” is a hedge, separating the woods from the human community that has been built while the animals hibernated. Only, the animals do not know what a hedge is. They only know that this is something they have not experienced it before, and it has never been there before. Because it is new, the animals are afraid. Will this hedge hurt them? Will it protect them? Will it provide food?

As they wonder about the hedge, the animals decide to name it. Hammie, the squirrel, and voiced by actor Steve Carrell, exclaims, “We’ll call it Steve”.

This decision is met with favor by the other animals. Now that the hedge has a name, the hedge is not as terrifying as it had first appeared to be. As the movie continues, the animals learn more about the safety the hedge can provide for them. The animals discover that in naming the hedge, they are the ones who have power – literally and figuratively-- over the hedge.

Naming a person, place, or object is both a gift and a grace. Webster defines name as “a word or words by which a person or thing is known.” One’s reputation is based off this name. Name defines who we are, who we come from, even where and how we live. Quarryville, for example, received its name from the multiple stone quarries in the area as the first settlers arrived. Even Mt. Eden’s name has a history and a story behind how it received its name. And, stories exist of Mt. Eden’s – or “Mt. Eatin’” –’s reputation throughout the community.

The Bible has much to say about name and the influence Name has within our lives. One particular place is at creation. In creation, God names everything -- both, individually, and collectively. Individually, there is darkness and light, night and day, water and dry land, animals and plants of land, sea, and air. Each and every one of these things are named by God. God collectively names everything that has been created as being good, perfect in who and what they are. Proverbs reminds us ‘that a good name is better to be chosen than riches’. Meaning, one will be remembered for one’s name and one’s reputation rather than one’s wealth.

When a child is born, there is much discussion about what to name the child. This discussion can revolve around whether or not the child will be named after a beloved family member or friend, or today, whether or not the gender of the child is known. The discussion can include a favorite actor or actress of parents, or a favorite location. The discussion can focus on whether or not the child's name should be common, or one that is unique to the child. Sometimes nicknames are given later after a personality characteristic, trait, or feature particular to that person.

Mary and Joseph did not have the conversation about what to name Jesus. They simply knew. Both had been told by an angel what their child's name would be. They were told this as part of God's overall plan. Luke records in verse 21 – a verse omitted from today's Gospel reading – that *“after eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”*

While our lectionary skips over this verse, in the grander scheme of things, this verse is really important. This verse shows that it was God, through an angel who named Jesus. Not Mary. Not Joseph. But God. God who names all things as good named His Son Jesus – meaning, “Savior” of all people. In naming Jesus, God declares what Jesus' future role will be – to save the world.

This verse also shows that Mary and Joseph were obedient to the law of the day. Earlier in Luke's account of the birth of Christ, we heard how Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem because of the decree that went out from the governor. Today's Gospel shows that Mary and Joseph were also obedient to the religious laws of their day – going to the temple as they were required to do, following requirements for purification, following the requirements for naming a child. In fulfilling these laws, Mary and Joseph are fulfilling all that has been foretold.

Only when they encounter Simeon and Anna in the temple do Mary and Joseph begin to realize the significance of the name of Jesus. Both Simeon and Anna had been waiting a long time to see Jesus. When Simeon sees Jesus, he blesses the Child. In blessing Jesus, he confidently prays also to be dismissed – yes, he has seen the Lord, and prays for his life to be over. Anna also had been waiting for a very long time, and rejoices in seeing the Christ Child.

Who is this Child that sends strangers into songs of praise? It is the Christ Child, the Child who had been foretold through the prophets. It is the Christ Child, who came, taking on human flesh, to be with us, to be one of us. It is the Christ Child, whose light shines in the darkness. It is the Christ Child who guided us through the past year, and will guide us into the year ahead.

“This, this, is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard, and angels sing. Haste, haste, to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary”.