

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
January 1, 2023 – The Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ  
Luke 2:15-21  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today – January 1<sup>st</sup>, the eighth day after Christmas Day – we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Feast of the Holy Name is not a feast day of the church – like All Saints Day – that can be transferred to a Sunday if it falls on another day of the week. So, unless you attend a large Episcopal Church where there is a service on all the special days of the church year, this feast day may not be familiar to you.

The Law of Moses, written down in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, required that every male child be circumcised on the eighth day from his birth (Leviticus 12:3). It was a custom that this was when the child was named. This morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke records that Mary and Joseph fulfilled this Jewish law and that they named the baby Jesus, according to the direction of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:31) when he announced to Mary that she would bear God's Son. "Jesus" means "the Lord saves." As an angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream declared, "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

This ancient custom coincides with our much more modern custom of adopting New Year's resolutions at the beginning of the new calendar year. You may make them, or you may not. Some of us have given up the custom because we tend to make our resolutions too difficult to carry out, and we are discouraged by our failure.

As an example, listen to this "A Resolve for Every Morning of the New Year" made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by an American bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop John H. Vincent: "I will this day try to live a simple, sincere and serene life, repelling promptly every thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, impurity and self-seeking, cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity, and the habit of holy silence, exercising economy in expenditure, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust and a child-like trust in God." How do you think he did with that? I wouldn't have succeeded through January 1<sup>st</sup>!

I would like to apply the church feast day to the secular custom and suggest that each of us and all of us together as a church might seek in 2023 to speak and act more often and more faithfully "in the holy name of Jesus." What does it mean to speak or act in the name of someone? It means to serve as the person's ambassador or representative. As St. Paul said and as we are reminded by the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila, we are meant to be Christ's body in the world. When we speak or act in the holy name of Jesus, what we say and do must be in alignment with the teachings of Jesus, with the man we know from scripture, with the Lord we know in prayer.

This will be an ongoing process for each of us. It isn't realistic to decide, like Bishop Vincent, to be a perfect person, a perfect Christian every day, beginning today. Like development in all areas of human life, spiritual development takes time. And spiritual development involves both shedding bad habits and adopting good habits. In times of prayer and quiet we may take an honest look at ourselves and find that we sometimes think and speak and act in ways that could not be understood to be "in the holy name of Jesus." With God's help we may repent and change.

We may choose at the beginning of this new year to intentionally adopt some good spiritual habit. On this holy day I would recommend, as especially appropriate, the Jesus Prayer. You may recall that St. Paul exhorts the followers of Jesus to “pray without ceasing ... for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18). For most of us, prayer is far from something we engage in “without ceasing.” The Jesus Prayer – which is central to the spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox churches – offers us a way to pray more often and in more circumstances all through our days.

Scripture teaches us that the Name of God is powerful, and belief in the power of the Name of Jesus is the foundation for the Jesus Prayer. At the beginning of the prayer that Jesus taught are the words to God the Father, “hallowed be thy Name.” In the New Testament we read that demons were cast out and people were healed in the name of Jesus. After the resurrection, St. Peter proclaimed that salvation came through Jesus Christ, “for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

I’m sure that many of you are already familiar with the Jesus Prayer. It’s a simple prayer, with a few variations. The classical form is “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Variations include “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy;” “Lord Jesus, have mercy;” “Lord Jesus” or simply “Jesus.” Orthodox spiritual masters suggest that a person choose a form of the prayer that feels right and stick with it. The important thing is to include the holy name of Jesus and to have our hearts turned toward God.

Saying the Jesus Prayer is for everyone and is appropriate in any number of situations, all through the day, every day. Repeating this simple prayer helps us turn our attention to God in all the outward circumstances of our lives and in every experience of our inner lives. I’ll share with you a partial list of the times I have used the Jesus Prayer, with the hope that this will lead you to think of ways you might pray this prayer.

When I am impatiently waiting in line at a store; on hold during a telephone call; waiting at a traffic light; taking a walk; afraid or worried about myself or someone else; needing guidance from God; praying for people in need (remembering that I am praying to God, so I don’t need to provide a diagnosis and treatment plan); getting ready for the church service to begin; doing simple household chores, like washing dishes or vacuuming; having impatient or uncharitable thoughts toward someone; having a bad memory that has nothing to teach me; when I’m not feeling well or I can’t sleep; when I think of someone I love with gratitude; and when my heart is full of love for God and Jesus. This is just a partial list. I don’t use the Jesus Prayer anywhere near as often as it would be good for me to do, and I hope to do better in the new year.

You may feel led by God to take on the spiritual habit of the Jesus Prayer or you may be called to another spiritual practice in the new year. Ask for God’s help to discern a way to God. In words attributed to the 13<sup>th</sup> century bishop, Richard of Chichester: “Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.”

In the Holy Name of Jesus. Amen.