

Sermon on Luke 2:21-40
Sunday, January 1, 2012, The Name of Jesus
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Today I have some good news, and some bad news! First the good news: it is Sunday, the first day of a new week and the first Sunday in a new year! If you didn't like the past year, you can start all over again! Just consider how bad last year was for the economy, for politics, and for Minnesota sports. (This is the bad news!) The economy was dreadfully slow to recover from 2009's recession, homes still take too long to sell, property taxes went up for too many people, and too many still don't have jobs. In politics, Congress wasn't able to pass anything constructive, while the problem of our increasing debt and unbalanced budget only gets worse. The Minnesota state government shut down last year because the two political parties were unable to agree on a budget. State parks were closed over the Fourth of July weekend, and construction projects were halted, during a recession. And in professional sports, last year's Minnesota Wild couldn't win, the Timberwolves remained mired in futility, the Minnesota Twins lost over 90 games, and the Minnesota Vikings are now 3-12 while demanding a billion dollar stadium as their reward. It doesn't get much better than that, does it? Except for the Minnesota Lynx, who won the WNBA championship, and the Wolves finally got Ricky Rubio to come to town and join the team. That's the good news, for what it's worth.

So now, after a night of New Year's feasting and frolicking, here we are in Church for Sunday worship, on the first day of the year. I feel a bit like the priest in New Orleans, welcoming parishioners to Ash Wednesday mass after a night of carnival! Ashes, anyone? But the good thing is, anyone who is here this morning REALLY WANTS to be here, or you'd be at home in bed, right? And this year there will be not just 52, but 53 Sundays to gather for worship – that's what happens when Sunday falls on the first of January! So today is just a bonus for all of us – another day to praise God that we are alive, to start another year!

So what else can I say about Sunday, January 1st? Well, until the year 153 B.C. this was not the first day of the year! Before that, March 1st was the first day of the new year. Then, in the sixth century, March 25th became the first day of the calendar year throughout Christendom (because this was the date of the Annunciation). Finally, in 1582, Pope Gregory XIII reformed the calendar and restored the beginning of the year to January 1st, after the winter solstice.

But just like today, January 1st in the ancient, pagan world was a day for widespread revelry, eating and drinking. (The more things change, the more things stay the same!) So the Church gave no liturgical notice to the day whatsoever. It

was only noted as a day of fasting and penitence, in contrast to pagan revelry. On a January 1st sermon, St. Augustine preached, “I see you have come here as if we had a feast today. During these days when they revel, we observe a fast in order to pray for them!” And in Spain in the year 633, strict fasting and abstinence was prescribed for January 1st. (Even the word “Alleluia” was omitted from the Mass.)

But in the seventh century, January 1st was made a church holiday, transforming the pagan holiday into a church festival, and called it the feast of Saint Mary. In the Middle Ages it became associated with the Circumcision of our Lord and the Holy Name of Jesus. So today our Lutheran liturgical calendar has kept the feast day for the Name of Jesus on this first day of the year. It’s a healthy alternative to the over-indulgence and mindless celebration without purpose going on around us over football and parades on New Year’s Day.

Of what importance is a name? William Shakespeare asked in his famous play, *Romeo and Juliet*, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet; so Romeo would, were he not Romeo called.”

What does your name mean? I don’t mean literally, although your name might have a literal meaning. When your parents named you, they had a reason for giving you that name. It might have been just that they liked the sound of it. Or you may have been named after a parent, grandparent, or some other relative. Or maybe you were named with a very popular name in the year that you were born. I was named after my grandfather’s father, “James Henry Colwell”. You can look up your name in the year that you were born, on a website called *babycenter.com*. In 2011 the top boys names were Aiden, Jackson, Mason, Liam, Jacob and Jayden...the top girls names were Sophia, Emma, Isabella, Olivia, Ava and Lily. James was #24. Who knows why parents name their children what they do? Whatever the reason, you know that you were named for a reason, and your name has a meaning to your parents, your family, and those who love you.

Jesus received his name for a reason as well. In the first chapter of Luke, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to give her surprising news, that “*you will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. [Matthew adds, ‘for he will save his people from their sins.’] He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*”

Jesus is a form of the name *Joshua, or Yehoshuah*, which means *Yahweh is salvation or God saves*. It was a fairly common name in the first century, due to a rising tide of nationalism while under Roman domination. Jesus’ followers saw him as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, when God promised to send a Messiah to save God’s people. In our first lesson, God would vindicate God’s people, and make Israel a shining light to the nations. “*You shall be called by a*

new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” To the apostles and gospel writers, Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophet’s words.

So when Joseph and Mary brought the infant Jesus to the Temple, in order to sacrifice two turtledoves to God in thanksgiving for the gift of a firstborn child, a man called Simeon – who came to the Temple daily to look forward to the consolation of Israel, was guided by the Holy Spirit to the child, Jesus. When he saw the child, he took the baby in his arms and praised God, saying, *“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”*

Why did Simeon sing this song? Because he had seen, he had even HELD the child who would bring salvation to his people, the one whom God had promised. This is what Simeon believed, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who had helped Simeon to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Now he could die in peace, knowing that his people’s future had this hope from God.

A similar witness comes from Anna, an 84-year-old widow, who came daily to the Temple to fast and pray – when she, too, encountered the baby Jesus. She joined Simeon in praising God for this child, who would bring redemption to all Jerusalem. These two faithful elders remind us that Christmas is not just about children, toys, and feasting. It’s about seeing God’s gift in a child named Jesus.

Today, the holy scriptures and the carols of Christmas help *us* to recognize in Jesus the hope that God has in store *for us*. Having heard the good news of God’s love come down to earth, in the person of this child, in the life and the work of this man Jesus, we also have hope in the salvation given to us as a gift from God! So at the end of the Mass, at the end of Holy Communion, we often sing this same song. For in hearing the good news of the gospel, in hearing the words of forgiveness for our sins, in receiving the bread and wine of Holy Communion (Jesus’ body and blood), we can now go out from this place into the world, with hope and assurance that God is with us (through His Son).

So no matter how “bad” the past year has been for us, no matter how chaotic life has been, no matter what we have lost, we can enter this new year with assurance and hope. No matter how many times you and I have fallen short, another new year reminds us that God always gives us a “second chance”, and a third, and more after that! For God has sent His Son to us, God has forgiven us all our sins, God has a purpose for each one of us to fulfill in this world, and God sends us out to be God’s voice and God’s hands of love and compassion for others. So I close with these words from Paul’s letter to the Colossians: *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body...And*

whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Thanks be to God. Amen.