

Sermon for 1/1/12
The Holy Name

A few years ago I started hearing people say that they had a “Senior Moment” when they forgot something for a moment.

That small joke has become so ubiquitous that I’m pretty sure I’ve heard people in their 20’s and 30’s claim to have had a senior moment; all I can think is, “just wait – it gets even more fun.”

If you’re a dedicated worker of crossword puzzles then you probably know the name of the hard tip on the end of a shoelace; I never even thought about that thing until I learned that it’s called an aglet.

And what about that little depression in the center of your lip, right under your nose?

Did you know that it’s called a philtrum?

I only know because I looked it up.

Sometimes we have too many cute names for the same thing.

Today it gets called a muffin top; it used to be called love handles.

Before that it was called a spare tire; my favorite variation here is to call it a Dunlop: that’s what you get when your spare tire done lopped over your belt.

Of course all those names are easier to accept than just calling it what it is: too much fat.

There are times when learning a name can be very comforting.

I find this to be particularly true when it comes to medical issues.

When people are suffering from something but they don’t know what it is, getting a name for it can really make a difference.

In my lifetime the disease AIDS was identified and named; even before any kind of treatment had been developed for it, just having a name for why so many people were dying helped focus a response and became something of a comfort.

And while the name Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome may cover many different symptoms, I think having a name for it may be a source of strength and comfort and may be a help for the battle-weary members of the armed forces as they leave Iraq behind and return home.

It works in theology as well.

When Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he wanted to know God’s name; as far as we can tell the answer was simply “I Am.”

The most important fact was that God IS, that God exists; everything else flows from that one fact.

We often think of the God that’s presented in the Old Testament as being a vengeful, angry God whom we should fear.

And while that does capture some of the ways that God is presented in the earlier books of the Bible, it doesn’t do justice to the later books.

Many of books that were written more recently began to talk about how God loves and cares for the people of the world.

But the idea of a loving God seems to be somewhat tentative, somewhat undefined; it can feel as if the writers are struggling to name something that they have experienced but that they don’t understand fully.

Today it’s different.

We now have a name for the love of God active in this world and for us: Jesus Christ.

Once we became able to put a name to God’s love, we were far better able to realize that God’s love is real and that it can make a powerful difference in our lives.

That’s really the heart of the message of Christmas.

Because God was born as a human being to share our lives, we know that God is with us.

Instead of seeing God as a distant, somewhat disapproving omnipotent being to be feared, we begin to realize that God is knowable.

When we realize that Jesus taught about forgiveness and about the power of love, then we learn that God is a loving and forgiving God.

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Now that we can name God's love, active in the world – Jesus Christ – we can move away from that image of a vengeful God that can be so terrifying for so many people.

But there's even more to this particular name.

Linguistically, Jesus is the same name as the Old Testament name Joshua: they've just been translated differently.

The first Joshua became the leader of the Israelites after Moses died.

He was the one who led the people of Israel out of the wilderness, across the Jordan River and into many successful battles for the control of Palestine.

You've heard the song "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls come tumblin' down," haven't you?

It's a celebration of the time when Joshua helped his people conquer the Promised Land.

That the miracle worker from Galilee shared a name with the general who led the victory to win the land flowing with milk and honey would not have gone unnoticed by the people of Jesus' time.

Moreover, the name Joshua, or Jesus, or Yeshua can be translated as God Saves or God Will Save.

The people of Israel expected that the Messiah would be another Joshua who would save them by leading them to victory over the Romans.

Instead they learned that God's salvation is eternal, not worldly, when the Messiah was Jesus who wound up leading them and us to a victory over sin and death so that we might inherit the eternal life that is a gift from God.

We know that God's love for us is real.

We know it's real because we have a name for it.

God's love was made real for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The great gift to us at Christmastime is the annual reminder that God is not distant and mysterious but that God is nearby and known.

And by the name of Jesus Christ we know that God loves us, that God forgives us, and that God longs for us to be in a close relationship with God.

Again, I can't say it enough, the love of God is real.

We have a name for it and, as the hymn proclaims, "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, every tongue confess him King of glory now."

Let us be eternally thankful for the holy name of Jesus.

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