

The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ
The Church of Saint Mary The Virgin, Times Square
January 1, 2023

Propers: Exodus 34:1-8; Psalm 8; Romans 1:1–7; Luke 2:15–21
By the Reverend James Ross Smith

But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb (Luke 2:19–21).

Almost all the church’s great holy days emerge as a way of recalling and celebrating the biblical story. The Church’s celebrations on January 1 are no exception. The events described in this morning’s gospel are one of the things that bring us here today. We come to praise God for his many blessings and, especially in this season, for sending us his Son, who “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7), and who lived as a human being, constrained by time and mortality, just as we are. And we know that the One who is uniquely Son of God and Son of Man is Jesus, who was also a son of David (Romans 1:3), and whose life was shaped by the rules and customs of his people, the Jewish people. And in accordance with those customs, he was given the name Jesus—which means “God saves”—on the eighth day after his birth. And on that same day his body received the mark of the covenant through the rite of circumcision. And all this took place according to the dictates of Torah, God’s holy Teaching and Law. And our appointed gospel tells us all this.

But the words of the gospel passage we just heard are dense, so much so that in order to create a celebration for the turn of the year, the

Church has found itself highlighting different aspects of that biblical story over time.

The first aspect is linked to the phrase “and at the end of eight days” (Luke 2:21). The Jewish custom helps shape the later Christian tradition. Beginning in the fourth century, the church decides that celebrating its most holy feasts on a single day is insufficient. Taking a cue from the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Day, which is both first and eighth day, the Church extends the celebrations of Easter, Pentecost, Epiphany, and later Christmas, to eight days, often called an “octave.” In the earliest extant liturgical texts in the West the celebration on the 1st of January is called simply *Octava Domini*, the Octave of the Lord, which is to say the eighth day after the feast of the Nativity. And so, first of all, this feast day is about Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

The second focus of the January 1st celebration emerges from the phrase “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). The late Roman Catholic Benedictine liturgist, Patrick Regan, tells us that in Rome the earliest, and for a time the only, Marian feast took place on January 1. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have returned to this ancient practice.¹ For them, today is The Octave Day of Christmas, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God.² We here at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin can benefit from acknowledging this, as we too ponder the meaning of Jesus Christ at the turn of the year.

¹ Regan, Patrick, *Advent to Pentecost: Comparing the Seasons in the Ordinary and Extraordinary Forms of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), pp. 58–59.

² <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/christmas/christmas-january-1>

The third aspect of the January 1st celebration arises from the phrase in our gospel passage, “when he was circumcised” (2:21) The practice of keeping January 1st as a commemoration of Jesus’ circumcision emerges rather late in the Church’s history, appearing in Roman Catholic liturgical texts only in the 1500s. In a similar way, the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 makes January 1st a commemoration of the “Circumcision of Christ,” a practice that has a long life³. Unfortunately, such a focus became too narrow, too limited, and, in a way, too partisan: Oddly, the day became more about circumcision than about Christ. In the Collect of the Day, “the true circumcision of the Spirit” is contrasted with the Jewish rite of circumcision, which is implicitly criticized for being too bodily and too literal. This is an unfortunate development since in our gospel passage circumcision is simply a given and Luke may be including a mention of it, in part, as a way of pointing to Jesus’ heritage and to his humanity. It is for these reasons, and others, that the Episcopal Church decided in the 1970s to abandon the focus on Christ’s circumcision on January 1st so that it could give thanks for the divine gift of the Holy Name, which is the fourth aspect of the biblical story that had, in fact, long been a part of the first of January celebrations.

The Collect of the Day for this feast reads in part, “Eternal Father, you gave to your incarnate Son the holy name of Jesus to be the sign of our salvation: Plant in every heart, we pray, the love of him who is the Savior of the world . . .” The prayer reminds us that the Name of Jesus has become over time an object of Christian devotion in both East and West. The Jesus Prayer in the Orthodox tradition—“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me”—is a well-known example of such a devotion. But the words of the prayer, today’s

³ http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Readings_Xmas_1549.htm#Circumcision

readings, and the links to the season’s ongoing biblical story taken as a whole—Annunciation, Nativity, Circumcision, Presentation in the Temple, as well as the Visit of the Wise Men, the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents, and the Flight into Egypt—remind us that Jesus’ name is divinely chosen and divinely given. And it is given for a reason. “Jesus” is a name in which God embeds his love for us and his determination to save what he has created.

Patrick Regan concludes his remarks on the history of Christian celebrations on January 1 with a partial and surprising critique of his own Roman-Catholic tradition. He applauds the decision in the 1960s to give Mary the focus on January 1st, while maintaining a secondary focus on the Octave of Christmas and the Holy Name of Jesus, but, he writes, the appointed prayers for this day “fail to express openly and directly that this is New Year’s . . . [and so] many will find the official texts of this solemnity insufficiently related to the real reason they are at Mass this day.”⁴

I suspect that Regan speaks for many of you, too, who came here this morning, having celebrated New Year’s Eve, in order to mark a new year and a new beginning, to acknowledge that we live in God’s time, not our own, and to ask God to bless and sanctify our hopes, promises, dreams, resolutions, and goals for the coming year. Our faith in Jesus, whose name is holy, should give us the confidence to acknowledge both the successes and the failures of the year that is past, even as we turn to Jesus, whose name means “God saves, praying that he will strengthen us throughout the coming year.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

And so, on this day of new beginnings allow me share with you Saint Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians and let it be my prayer for all of you, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24).

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