



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### The Feast of the Holy Name

#### God Knows You by Name

[RCL] Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

As the story begins, our protagonist is living in obscurity. A series of events will bring this unique individual into their proper place of leading the charge as good overcomes evil and right casts down might. The main character is more than people first realize; he or she has greater depth, insight, and strength of character than others realize. The Hero's Journey is embedded into ancient literature and in more contemporary fiction, including *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hunger Games*.

This discovery of a secret identity is also the basic story in the ancient tale of Oedipus, which plays itself out with tragic consequences. You will find variations on the theme in fairytales like *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, particularly in their written forms. The King Arthur legend also has this central element of the boy Arthur not knowing he is the heir to the throne of England until he is the only one who can miraculously pull the sword from the stone.

Harry Potter is an orphan forced to live under the stairs when an invitation to Hogwarts arrives. Luke Skywalker yearns for adventure as he grows up on a sparsely inhabited desert planet in the galaxy's Outer Rim Territories at the beginning of the Star Wars saga. Why is this such an enduring story? Do we long to be something more than everyone else sees?

Perhaps this fiction captures our imaginations as this story is embedded in the Gospels. Mary is a young girl whose great potential seems known to God alone when the Angel Gabriel comes to her in Nazareth. Mary saying "Yes" to God will change human history. Jesus' story, as well as his mother's, follows this storyline. Mary and Joseph raised Jesus as a carpenter's son in the backwater town of Nazareth, where few knew his real identity. For the first thirty years of his life, Jesus grew to manhood in the care of his mom and stepdad, his true identity always there in his name.

Jesus is "the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." Jesus is "the name that is above every name." Jesus was a very common Hebrew name, both centuries before and long after Mary called her firstborn child by this name. Jesus is the same as the names Joshua, Hosea, and Isaiah, meaning "God saves" or "God is salvation."

In Hebrew thought, a name signifies the essence of someone. *Yehoshua*, “God saves,” was not merely what people called Mary and Joseph’s child; rather, God’s salvation was to be the very meaning and purpose of his life.

We also find throughout scripture examples of God recognizing something more in the essence of someone than their name captures. God then gives the person a new name. God renamed Abram and Sarai. The name Abram meant “exalted father,” but God called him Abraham, meaning “the father of nations.” Sarai meant “quarrelsome,” but God called her Sarah, which means “princess.” God took Jacob, which means “heel grabber” and named him Israel, meaning “the one who struggles with God.” Jesus will also call Simon, whose name means “to hear” or “to listen” by the name Cephas or Peter, both of which mean “rock.” Saul, who is the persecutor of the first followers of Jesus, will be given the Greek name Paul as he is sent to bring the Good News of God’s salvation found in Jesus to the Gentiles, who would otherwise remain left out of the coming reign of God.

The maker of heaven and earth seeing you as no one else does and calling you by name or even giving you a new name has the same dramatic appeal as the Hero’s Journey found throughout literature. There is something alluring in discovering that you are more than you may seem to others.

Paul reminds us in Galatians that the Holy Spirit bears witness to each of us, telling us that we are children of God. You are not only a child of God but also an heir. You are a joint heir with Jesus the Christ. Paul says that you can call out to God saying, “Abba, Father.” The word Abba is now, as it was when Paul wrote, a loving term. To translate his phrase further into today’s language, you can cry out to God, saying “daddy,” or “papa,” or whatever you would say to a loving father. That’s how close you are to God.

Calling God “Father” does not limit God to being male, nor does it make God into any of the bad fathers you may have known. What speaking of God as father did in ancient Israel was to open the idea that God can have heirs, people who inherit the fullness of what is God’s. Paul highlighted the personal nature of being God’s child, writing that we can cry out to God as our “Abba,” our “daddy.”

We could avoid the tremendous emotional and physical damage we humans do to each other and to ourselves if we could truly see ourselves as God sees us and then see those around us as God sees them. Everyone you have ever known was made in the image and likeness of God. Yet people go around not understanding their value because they don’t know that they are the beloved children of the creator of the cosmos.

Youth ministry and college campus ministry are extraordinarily vital, as those years are when people come to see themselves apart from their parents and family. Making it out of middle school and high school with any shred of self-esteem is miraculous. Most people, often between the ages of ten and twenty-five, pick up emotional wounds that will remain festering and seeping poison into their psyches unless they can find healing. At 40, they remember the name of the bully in sixth grade and at 50, they recall the friend who betrayed them with gossip. Any of us can fall into replaying tapes in our heads of the harsh and cruel

things others have said and see ourselves through their eyes. If you take those messages to heart, you are not seeing yourself as God sees you. God sees you as beloved. The maker of heaven and earth knows you by name, loves you as you are, and wants better for you.

There are people in this community who do not see yet themselves as God sees them. Each of us is placed in a family, a workplace, and among friends where we can remind those we love of how much God loves them. We have a mission to reach out to others in Jesus' name, sharing the same mercy, grace, and forgiveness we have found. We don't have to go looking for these opportunities – we just need to speak up when we see someone in grief or other emotional pain. You and I might not seem essential to the great unfolding story of history, but God gives us the grace of bringing the Good News to those who are hurting – the Good News that God knows them by name and wants them to discover their destiny as a child of God and joint heir with Jesus. The Hero's Journey is meant to be everyone's story.

***The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue** is the Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia. He previously served on the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and was the church planter for King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia.*