

Holy Name
January 1, 2017

St. Paul's
McHenry

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.
Amen.

Today -- this day -- represents so many things that I hardly know where to begin. I should begin, I suppose, with Holy Name Day, not only because it's today, January 1st, but because I have a story about it.

My friend, Pat Merchant, was eligible to be the first woman regularly ordained in 1977. But she chose to wait until January 2nd... because in those days, January 1st was known as "The Feast of the Circumcision." It wasn't until the then "new" prayer book in 1979 that this particular feast day was rechristened "Holy Name." Same feast day; different name.

In addition to this being Holy Name Day, it is also the First Sunday after Christmas, and in fact, today is the seventh day of Christmas (you know, as in the Twelve Days of Christmas).

It is also, of course, New Years Day; a time when we indulge in hopeful resolutions for the coming year. And Friday, January 6th, will be Epiphany, celebrating the visit of the Magi.

Of course, most of the rest of the world was done with Christmas on the 26th. Only a handful of us will leave up our Christmas trees until Epiphany!

From a worldly point of view, this is something of a low point in the year. Since Thanksgiving, we've all been caught up (to one degree or another) in what we euphemistically call "the holidays": shopping, parties, entertaining, visiting, decorating, eating. Now it's time to tighten up the budget, clean up the diet, straighten up the house.

January is the perfect time for these tasks. Named for the Roman god Janus -- a two-faced god who looks backward and forward at the same time -- it's a good time for reflecting on the past and planning for the future. Which is probably much like what Mary and Joseph were doing about now.

Remember from the Christmas Eve story? “[The shepherds] made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed... But Mary treasured all these [things] and pondered them in her heart.... After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

Yes, they looked back, remembering the events that had surrounded their child's birth; and they looked ahead, naming and circumcising him according to the Hebrew traditions. And his name would be a name above all names, so declared the prophets; a name to be called on by all people.

As we, too, look back and look ahead, what better time than this to consider what this birth and his Holy Name means to us; how we will live out our lives as Christians and how we will call on his name.

The meaning of Christ's birth – and in fact his life – is clearly stated for all of us, for all time, in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

It's very simple: the coming of Christ into the world has made us sons and daughters of God. Nothing less! The very sons and daughters of God. The only question is what does this mean in terms of how we live out our lives in Christ. And it is here that I believe we make our sad mistakes.

I'm not talking about horrible sins; not at the moment anyway. I'm talking about our tendency to look back and our failure to look ahead; the ease with which we stay immersed in the past and rob ourselves of the future -- the abundant life -- which is God's will for us.

Let's face it: every one of us has a story. Every one of us comes to this altar to kneel before God with some pain, some regret, some fear, some grief unfinished, some resentment, some need unmet -- our story. It may be known to no one but God alone. But we have it... and consciously or unconsciously, we carry it with us.

An old friend of mine tells the story about a time when she was moving from one location to another, and for the first time in her life, she was financially able to hire professionals to pack and move her. When asked what she wanted packed, she waved her arms and said, "Everything!"

When she got to her brand new place and began organizing her new household, she discovered that along with her furniture and belongings, the movers had packed her trash as well. There she was in her beautiful new home... along with her old garbage! Empty ketchup bottles, old newspapers, grapefruit peels!

We're just like that! It's not that we don't have to take responsibility for our actions -- it's that we keep carrying our garbage around with us even after we've moved on.

Here is the most important story I've ever told. I try to tell it at least once a year until we all get it:

There was once a bishop, a much loved man of God. But he carried the burden of a secret, long-past sin buried deep in his heart. He had committed this sin only once. He had repented and suffered years of remorse for it, but still he carried it with him.

There was a old cleaning woman in his cathedral who deeply loved God, and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ and he with her. The bishop was concerned about the validity of her claims and sought to silence her.

So he challenged her: "If you actually speak with Christ, ask him what sin I have committed. If you cannot tell me, than you must cease to make the claim that you speak with him." The woman agreed.

Some time passed and the bishop began to get a little nervous. When he next encountered the woman, he asked her, "Well, did you speak with Christ?" She said, "Yes, your grace, I did." "And did you ask him what was my sin?" "Oh, yes, your grace, I did." Now exceedingly nervous, the bishop said, "Well, what did he say?" "Your grace, he said... 'I forget.'"

It is January 1st. It is New Years Day. It is Holy Name Day. It is many things. Time to look back, but only to reflect and learn. Time to leave our story there, to look ahead and, calling on his Holy Name, expect God to do something new and extraordinary in our lives.

Amen.

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