

The Name of Jesus  
January 1, 2006  
Luke 2.15-21  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

I hope there's a story behind your name and that you know it ☺. Apparently I became "Mary Virginia" because my mother was a devout Roman Catholic, and in the 1950's, not too long before I was born, the pope put out a call for all pregnant mothers to name their daughters "Mary." I think my mom was in the minority listening to him, because there weren't too many other "Mary's" around me as I grew up. There were some Mary Ann's, Mary Ellen's, Mary Jane's, Mary Jo's, and Mary Lou's, but certainly no other Mary Virginia's! It took me 48 years to find another Mary Virginia, and she died last week in her 90's....

Story has it that my Aunt Harriet was horrified at my parents' choice of a name for me, her youngest niece, and she asked my mother what she could have been thinking of, adding, "With a name like that, she'll be everybody's servant!" I guess she was thinking of the Annunciation Gospel we heard on Advent 4, when Mary says to the angel Gabriel, "I am the handmaiden of the Lord, let it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1.38)

In a way, Aunt Harriet's words were prophetic because I have chosen the vocation of the ordained ministry, which means serving God **and** God's people, at the font, at the altar, in the pulpit, in the classroom and sickroom and in a lot of other places. To be the handmaiden of the Lord is to be the handmaiden of God's people. I'm okay with that. I'm blessed to love what I do. I get to "follow my bliss," every day. I get to serve you and to serve beside you. That's a position of privilege and honor.

It used to be that a Christian child had to be named for a saint or a person in the Bible. Pastors would refuse to baptize children with the name of Tiffany, for instance, because there wasn't any friend of Jesus on record with that name. Pastors have lightened up a lot in the past several decades, though. I've had trouble **pronouncing** some names at the baptismal font, but I've never **vetoed** any.

I know parents put serious, careful thought into what they name their beloved children. (I **did** hear recently of someone named "Craven," though. I don't think the parents realized that it means "cowardly." "Seems like an unfortunate choice....") The name parents pick for their child has **meaning** to them – it's a connection to a special person or place, or it embodies their prayers and hopes for their child. There may be no widely recognized saint with the name they choose, but hopefully their child will live a holy, loving life and will bring honor to the name his or her parents chose. We Lutherans believe we are called to be saints **today**. I am confident there is even now a Saint Tiffany walking somewhere in our midst!

This New Year's weekend we celebrate "The Name of Jesus." The Gospel tells of His circumcision and naming on the eighth day after His birth; the naming is the more important of the two events. When the angel told Zechariah that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son, the angel also told him to call the baby John ("God is gracious"). When the angel told Mary that **she** was going to have a son, the angel told her to call the baby Jesus. It would be like someone today telling parents in the same breath that they're pregnant and that they should call the baby X, Y or Z. No need for a book of baby names in that scenario! Just direct word from on high about what your child's destiny will be, because in the Bible a name is a foreshadowing of who the person will become.

By naming one's children Joy, Grace, Faith, Hope, one puts them on a certain trajectory from the get-go. "Ruth" means mercy.... Doesn't that fit our friends around here who are named Ruth?? Christopher means Christ-bearer; Kristiane, Christian, Christine all mean believer in Christ. Theodore or "Ted" means gift of God. Lily means pure. Michael means defender of God. Ann/Anna/Hannah mean grace. Jesus means savior.

Someone once said, "Jesus is honey to the lips, music to the ear, and a shout of gladness in the heart." When I was small, I learned to bow my head whenever I hear or say the name of Jesus. In Philippians we read:

...God... highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
(Philippians 2.9-11)

One of the most powerful prayers of all is called the Jesus Prayer, which rose up in the Eastern Church and eventually spread to the West. It is based on the words of a tax collector recorded in the Gospels:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Some people have used it as a mantra, repeating it step by step over journeys hundreds of miles long, or on occasion to calm a storm within their hearts or simply to draw nearer to the heart of God. If you've never prayed it, try it on for size in this new year of grace:

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

It has been said that these words don't just call upon God; they **carry** God.

On this feast of The Name of Jesus, we rejoice in the gift of our Savior. We celebrate the fact that whatever **our** name is, we are also called by **His** name, Christian. We pray that we live our lives in such a way that we bring honor to **His** name, and that our **particular** name becomes associated with goodness, kindness, courage, wisdom, power from on high, self-sacrificing love, indestructible hope, undying faith. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson