

Naming & Saving
The Feast of the Holy Name
January 1, 2023
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There are a lot of ways to start a new year. Some may start the new year groggy and hungover. Maybe you start the new year with collard greens and black-eyed peas? I was recently told not to clean my house on New Year's Day because that washes away any good luck, and frankly, that sounds like a good enough reason to me. The fireworks at midnight were intended to scare off evil spirits, so that they won't accompany us into 2023. Eat twelve grapes? I don't know. Open the doors to let the old out and the new in? Okay.

I'm a fan of the first day hike movement, though I'm not sure that's going to happen this afternoon, maybe sometime this first week. And I am a life-long maker of resolutions, though sadly not a life-long keeper of resolutions. I really love the newer, or old and recently reclaimed, idea of naming the year - choosing a word for the coming year. The idea is not to choose a word that's connected to a goal like exercise; it's more like choosing a word to shape the coming days, a word about your values. It can be a verb like create or listen, or a noun like compassion, hope, or awe. And then the idea is to keep that word in mind in the minor and major events of our lives. Because what we call something matters and impacts how we think about things; we give things meaning when we name them.

This year, the secular new year and the church's feast of the Holy Name coincide on a Sunday, so while we're still telling the Christmas stories and singing the Christmas hymns, we are focusing in on the naming, the name given by the angel: Jesus. Jesus emerges in English via a trip through Greek from its Hebrew and Aramaic roots as Joshua or Yeshua. And the best way to translate the *meaning* of the name is "to deliver" or "to rescue." This naming is saturated with meaning, and the directive to name this child "Rescuer" comes from the angel of God in his conversation with Mary. This is the purpose and meaning of Jesus from the very beginning.

For me, this rescuing looks a particular way in my particular life. I'm guessing it does in your life too, or you probably wouldn't be bothering with church at all - much less first thing on New Year's Day. For me, this rescuing is not being extricated from a plot in which God was ready to smite me and Jesus stepped in. Substitutionary atonement works for some folks, but it has never squared with the God of mercy and love and wonder that I was introduced to and with whom I fell in love. And also, mysteriously, Jesus is God and God is Jesus, so they're not on different sides of an equation. Rather, God in Jesus rescues me the way search parties go out into the woods or out to sea to find the wayward, lost, or drowning soul who thought she could handle the hike or the currents on her own but got horribly turned around and is dangerously adrift. Jesus the deliver-er, delivers us back to shore, or like the lost sheep, back to the fold, back to a place of safety and care. Jesus saves us - not from an angry God who needs appeasing - but from ourselves: our egos, our

pride, our insecurities, our fears - those death-dealing attributes, and ultimately from death itself. Jesus wakes you and me from the nightmare that is believing we're alone and adrift and shows us the dream of God for each of us: that we belong to each other and that we belong to God. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus shine like a searchlight or a lighthouse in a dark world.

That rescuing lifeline takes on an infinite number of shapes: a Messiah-singing chorus, not unlike (I think) the heavenly chorus that saved the shepherds and called them to go with haste. Or quiet, treasured moments where we look around our living rooms at our families and ponder how we got here and in the same breath wonder what the future holds, perhaps like Mary holding her own lifeboat in her arms. Salvaging a disastrous journey by sharing rooms with those who have no place in the inn, or no running water or no departing flight; these are but a few glimpses of the manifold ways that Jesus redeems you and me by helping us redeem our messy, broken, wayward lives.

This little baby who is God is named Jesus, is named Savior. I wonder what that means for you? How are you saved? How does Jesus save you? And from what are you saved? I wonder what it means to walk out from this place this morning into this day in this new year named as rescued souls, as people who have been pulled back from the brink. What if we are already secured and what if the days before us are already redeemed. What if we blessed this new year with the name of Jesus, saving and saved. And then we called that name throughout the year, keeping Jesus' rescuing work in mind in the minor and major events of our lives. Because what we call things matters and impacts how we think about things; we call him Jesus.