

St James United Church

Message for January 1, 2023

First Sunday of Christmas and Holy Name of Jesus



“What’s in a Name?” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 63:7-9; Luke 2:16-21; “New Year’s Morning” by Helen Hunt Jackson

It's been eight days since Christmas, so today is Jesus' *brit milah* when he is given his name, the one given by God at his conception. Up until now we've mostly heard a few titles for him - Lord, Christ, Saviour, Son of the Most High, heir to David's throne, but today we focus on the name he was given by God. We call him Jesus, but in Hebrew, he is called Yeshua, God saves. It was a common name of that time and place and understandably so. The people were living under the control of Rome, and longed for someone to set them free, akin to an earlier Yeshua, or Joshua, who led the people into the Promised Land.

It's an appropriate name. This baby would grow into a man seen by many as a successor to Moses, continuing the mission of God's great prophet and helping the people to live into a new way of being together - no longer enslaved, no longer beholden to an emperor, but only to God, and doing so by looking after each other. This is why the titles we associate with him were those given to the Emperor Augustus – Lord, Saviour, Son of the Gods – a sign that his mission was to reveal how true power lay in God's empire, God's Reign of peace, through love and justice, not in the Roman Empire, or any other for that matter, which brought peace but had done so through war, conquest, and fear.

But there's another title we associate with Yeshua, with Jesus, one that helps us understand how he'd bring about God's salvation - Emmanuel, God-with-us. We hear this name lived out in the reading from Isaiah, the prophet praying in gratitude for God's presence in good times and challenging times, carrying them with compassion, bringing guidance and strength. Jesus was born in continuity with that history, experienced as a profound embodiment of God in all that he said and did, but in a line with others - Moses, Miriam, Joshua, Deborah, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Mary, John the Baptist, each an instrument of God's compassion, guidance and strength.

As Christians, we're part of that same continuity, called to share God's saving grace, to be living expressions of God's caring in a world that feels anything but. Sadly, the issues we face often have been the result of fellow believers. It leaves me questioning if I want to be known by the name Christian given how many people view the word. Consequently, I often say that I'm a follower of Jesus. Even so, I know I don't always express his way of inclusion, compassion and love. As we begin a new year, I resolve to be more consistent in the prayer practices I shared with you over Advent, especially reading the gospels and epistles, reflections of Jesus' earliest followers on who he was and continues to be, pondering how well I am living out his witness. I encourage you to include reflecting on the New Testament in your spiritual practice this year.

As important as it is to reflect personally on how we embody God's saving mission, it is good to take time reflecting on that as a congregation. In the United Church, we have a document to help us do that, a Mission Articulation Plan or MAP. We're asked to reflect on it regularly, even draft a new one every so often as needs change. In preparation for this exercise this year, I have been looking to our name sake for inspiration. Now in the New Testament there are a few St. Jameses to look to. There is James, the brother of John. One of the first disciples called by Jesus along with John, Peter and Andrew, he was not only one of the Twelve but one of Jesus' closest friends. He is believed to have gone to Spain to spread the gospel and martyred on his return to Jerusalem. Another of the Twelve is James, son of Alphaeus. Little is known about him although traditionally he's thought to have written the Letter of James. Some think he may be the James known as "the brother of the Lord", "brother" viewed as a cousin. Protestants generally believe that Jesus' actual brother wrote the letter, although it doesn't much matter given that it's long been ignored because of its association with good works. I think that's a shame. The letter puts a face to faith. It takes John's letters with their emphasis on loving others as a way of loving God, and makes it concrete. This is well illustrated in his statement that you can't simply say to someone who is struggling – "Go in peace, keep warm and be well fed" – without providing them clothes and food to be as such. I like how practical he is.

Each of these Jameses give us insight into our mission as a congregation. I hear a willingness to take risks to share the good news. I also hear a desire to be practical in how we love, to engage real people dealing with real issues. And I hear them do it because of the relationship they share with Jesus, trusting that he meant it when he called them friends and siblings. I think this is why James addresses his audience as Beloved. That's a name I pray we can claim for ourselves and extend to one another too. It speaks of a heart-to-heart relationship, how in Jesus we've become family. To be one's beloved is to be seen, appreciated as you are, and not just celebrated in good times but supported in more challenging ones too. We are all beloved. Beloved of God. And of Jesus. I invite you to sit for a moment and take that in.

What a gift to know you're loved, really, truly loved by God. And as Beloved, Jesus gave us two great commandments, to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbour as ourselves. We love God when we love our neighbour and we do that when we love them not just as much as ourselves but as an extension of ourselves, to see that they too are beloved of God and treat them accordingly. This to me is how Jesus, working through us, gives a face to his name. God saves as we live out the antidote to worldly empires and embody God's empire of love. As I look at St. James, I see us doing this as we welcome newcomers with the same love as long-time members, share space with community groups, join others in the community as they respond to social and ecological issues. I'm sure there are other ways for us to reach out and ensure everyone feels they are beloved. We won't always get it right, as individuals or a congregation, but as Helen Hunt Jackson writes, each day is a new year, an opportunity to keep reflecting Jesus' presence to others, to keep embodying God's love. What better way to honour New Year's Day and Jesus' naming day than by making that our resolution, to live up to his name, in our love to be a means by which God saves? May it be so. Amen.