

The Rev. Jimmy Abbott  
The Feast of the Holy Name  
January 1, 2012  
Luke 2:15-21

### **Name It**

I have some news that is going to shock you. Children, you may want to cover your ears. Okay, here it goes: I am not a fan of Harry Potter. Pretty crazy, I know. I'm a huge nerd, Harry Potter is for nerds, so it stands to reason that I would enjoy Harry Potter. Well, brand me as a heretic then, because I can't stand Harry Potter.

My biggest problem throughout Harry Potter is the pervasive fear of Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is a classic version of the evil, dark power. He is bent on the destruction of innocent people, he strikes terror in the hearts of those who are good. He even wears black clothes. I mean, Voldemort is one evil dude.

What bothers so much about the series, is how nobody refers to Voldemort by his real name. Instead of saying "Voldemort," Harry Potter and his crew will refer to him as "You-Know-Who," the "Dark Lord," or "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." Every time somebody says one of those lines in the Harry Potter series, my blood boils. I just want to scream out – "He has a name. Use it!"

In the Christian tradition, we are far more fortunate than the characters in Harry Potter. Our Lord, through whom all things were made, has a name. In the Christian year, today is the Feast of the Holy Name. Today we celebrate and recognize that the only Son of God has a name, Jesus, the name that is above every name.

In the Jewish tradition, baby boys are circumcised and named on the eighth day of their life. So, counting forward from Christmas, January 1<sup>st</sup> is always the Feast of the Holy Name, the day on which Jesus was circumcised and named.

Now, don't get too caught up in the *name* "Jesus." As you know, many Spanish-speakers are named *Jesus*. And the name Joshua, is actually the anglicized, or English, version of the name, *Jesus*. So, when you run across someone named "Joshua," they are actually named after our Lord.

So today's feast, the Feast of the Holy Name, is not about honoring the name "Jesus" as if it is somehow divinely favored over, say, Jimmy, or Jeff, or Martha, or Stephanie. In today's feast, today's commemoration, we celebrate the *act* of naming. We remember that Mary and Joseph named their baby Jesus. And we celebrate that God names us as his children.

In both Jewish and Christian traditions, the act of naming is of utmost importance. Think back. Abram was renamed Abraham, because he was named by God to be the ancestor of many nations. Moses wanted to know God's name, and God named himself "I am who I am." Even today, at this baptism font, before a child is baptized, Jeff and I make a demand upon the parents and godparents – we say, "Name this child."

The act of naming someone or something gives us a way to identify that someone or something. A name gives us an understanding into the heart of that person, or that thing. And that is why I don't like Harry Potter. Voldemort has a name, but Harry Potter and his crew are afraid to use it. They fear that by mentioning "You-Know-Who" they will be come under an evil influence. And that is what is wrong. They are afraid of naming it.

As Christians, we cannot live in that sort of fear. If God has taken on a name, Jesus, and if God has named us as his children, then surely we can name the other powers in our lives. And I don't just mean people, I mean things, emotions, problems. We resort to insinuation and whispers rather than naming what we know is true. We're afraid that we'll offend somebody, or step on somebody's toes by naming something, by telling the honest truth.

But Christians, Christians should love one another well enough that we can hear these things being said, that we can name things as they are. Let me offer you a story:

I had a friend, a dear friend in seminary. Paul<sup>1</sup>, my friend, and I grew very close very quickly. We were in similar life situations, we had similar ideas and beliefs. We grew very close, playing football together, studying together, watching TV together. Paul and I loved one another as fellow Christians. And you know what, we named this love. When we would part for long breaks and vacations, we would honestly say to one another, “I love you.” We weren’t afraid, we named it.

Well, as our seminary years drew to a close, I wronged Paul, and wronged him badly. I said some things that were hurtful, I acted like a jerk. Then I moved back to Texas, and he back to California, and we left one another on a sour note. It was my fault, I had hurt him and our relationship gravely.

A few months after we graduated from seminary, Paul and I attended the same conference for new clergy. For a couple of days, we were cordial, we were civil, but there was clearly something between me and Paul. One afternoon during this conference, we conspired, and decided to skip the next workshop and play racquetball. And so we played. Now about an hour into our delinquent match of racquetball, we stopped for some water. As we were standing there in silence, you could sense that this wrong stood between us. This thing that I had done to him was lingering in that racquetball court. It was oppressive, it was painful. But it hadn’t been named. Finally, I just let it all go. I told Paul that I had wronged him, and had wronged our relationship. I told him that I had been a total jerk, which I had. And I named it. I named that thing that stood between us. And I said, “Paul, I hope you can forgive me.” He looked me in the

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<sup>1</sup> I am using an alias.

eye and said, “Jimmy, what you did hurt me. I was in pain. But of course you are forgiven. And I’ll have you know, that I still love you.” And so there, in our gross, manly racquetball sweat, we hugged one another. And let me tell you, our relationship is just as close as it has ever been. Because that thing, that wrong that I had done, was named. It no longer stood between us. We didn’t allow “You-Know-What” to linger in the corner, we named it. And because we named it, we overcame our fear, and we entered back into right relationship with one another.

Name what you see. With the power of the Holy Spirit, do not be afraid to name it: “That is pain. That is hunger. That is injustice. That is love. That is fellowship.” Don’t bow under the pressure of social niceties. In the Church, we should be able to love one another enough to name what we see, even if it hurts. Because at the end of the day, what matters is that we are all named by God. We are not named Jimmy, or Jeff, or Stephanie, or Karen – we are named by God. We are named as God’s children.