

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commings+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 2:15-20

"The Holy Name of Jesus"

Today is the beginning of a New Year. It is also the day that for many years we celebrated the Circumcision of Jesus – but through the veil of political correctness – it has been changed into the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. There is certainly nothing wrong with the “Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus” but understand that by Jewish Law - on the eighth day, something special had to happen. Not to worry – for the day of circumcision was also the day when the male child was officially named. Remember if you will the story of John the Baptist, whose father Zechariah, the priest, was struck speechless after being met by the angel in the Temple. He received his voice back on the ‘day of naming’ when people were asking “what are you going to name him” and he was trying to write something down - and he blurted out “His name is John” – the eighth day.

We also celebrate that day in Jerusalem, when both a prophet and a prophetess affirm and reveal God's plan. Because of the way the readings fall in the lectionary, we don't get to read the part of the Gospel in which these two people, a man and a woman testify to what God was doing through this child, and so I want to share that with you today. Next week we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany when the three Magi come. We are not sure how many there were – may have been three or more – but they do bring three gifts. Here we know that this many any woman testify about this Child - that the whole world should rejoice at His coming. It was no accident that both these people - Simeon and Anna were older people with a full résumé of life experience. Anna's and Simeon's prophecies share a note of hope and absolute expectation, along with testimonies that in this child - God's promise was coming to realization. Here two old and wise prophets of Jewish piety spoke not only for the nation but for all humanity, as Simeon's prophecy mentions Jesus' relationship not just to he Jews but also to the Gentiles. However, with all of the good news there is also a hint that all will not go well. Mary will experience the pain of seeing her son rejected by a divided Israel.

The naming ceremony and circumcision of a young Hebrew child always took place eight days after birth. Mary and Joseph carefully observed the letter of the law. They would obediently name the boy Jesus, as they were instructed by the Angel Gabriel. They were, however, unable to bring a lamb which was indicative of their getting started as a married couple. In a very realistic sense, *“He who was rich became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.”* That the thank offering and the sin offering were united in this one presentation seemed to suggest gratitude and penitence were blending when the suppliants came to the altar of God. According to Exodus 12:2; Numbers 8:16 and Numbers 18:15, the first-born of man and beast were considered to be the property of God, but in the case of a child, he could be redeemed at the price of five shekels. Jesus, the Messiah, completely identified Himself with sinful man even from the beginning of His earthly life. Can you believe the degree of humiliation to which the King of Glory was subjected, leaving His throne and coming down, taking on flesh – and everything that goes with it? This King of Glory took on all of us!

God was never without a witness, even amidst all of the corruption of the Temple. You only have to look at Simeon and Anna whose eyes, ears, and hearts were open toward God.

Apparently Simeon was neither a great preacher nor an inspired singer. He was the type of man whose name would never be in the headlines of a national newspaper. Probably he never occupied a place on any select committee nor represented his organization at any important conference. He would never have been the President of a bank; nor mentioned in any vital news releases, for aside from this very brief mention in the New Testament – carries great weight, he was an unknown man who lived somewhere in the city of Jerusalem. The greatest thing ever said about him was that *“he was an intimate friend of the Holy Spirit.”* The Holy Spirit was upon him.

Simeon recognized that his nation was in great danger. He knew that he would actually, in his lifetime, see the Messiah. By what means he would recognize the Messiah when the moment arrived, we are not told. He probably never worried about it. That very morning he felt a compelling urge to go to the Temple. We are not told whether he had heard stories of what had taken place in Bethlehem just days ago; we only know *“he came by the Spirit into the temple.”* He was just in time to be in time! His song is absolutely beyond description. If you pray Morning Prayer – the Song of Simeon is right there – taken right out of Luke’s Gospel. *“Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’”* (Luke 2:28-35)

Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph, were probably very surprised that a stranger should be so acquainted with facts relating to their Son. It was true that the shepherds were aware of His presence but they knew that the angels had told them. How could this man have known? Such great detail was of course given him by the Holy Spirit. The Messiah, whom they knew was their son, would bring blessing to the Jews, but this strange man in the temple spoke of *“a light of Revelation to the Gentiles.”* This was a whole new idea, and both Joseph and Mary must have been surprised by this stranger’s message. Could it be that Simeon knew Isaiah 8:14? *“Then He shall become a sanctuary; but to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem”* Could it be that he knew that all of Isaiah pointed to their Son? He spoke of the fall and rise of many – was this the death and rebirth of many in Christ – and their resurrection with Him on the final day?

Through the death of Christ, which in itself would be a supreme sorrow to His mother Mary, the evil heart of the enemy would be made bare. Sin, which for a long time had been hidden under a thin veil of religious respectability, could be hidden no more. This new demonstration of evil would only deepen the wounds already in the heart of Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus, Sunday, January 1, 2017, Year A

Anna, from the tribe of Asher was an elderly lady who was certainly one of the most virtuous women in Israel. Luke spells out that she had been married seven years when her husband died and after that she was given a room, probably in the Temple, in which to live, set apart for her. It has been estimated that if she married at the age of fifteen, which was not unusual, and if after seven years of married life, she commenced eighty-four years of widowhood, her age at the time of Christ's coming to the Temple would have been one hundred and six. Probably this is more compatible with the statement, "*she was very old.*"

At the arrival of the child Jesus to the Temple, God used a man and a woman to announce the greatness of the event. This should serve as an important reminder to us that the job of proclaiming Christ is for every Christian. In those days the testimony of a woman was not held in very high esteem. Let's take a time-out here: who were the first people to learn that Jesus had risen from the dead? Women! The importance of women is really tremendous; understand that. It is one of the reasons why a very special event is coming up, later in the month in which my wife, Marilyn is going to start a Bible Study for women; a twelve week study about women of the Old Testament and women of the New Testament. This is a tremendous opportunity for women of St. Andrew's to find out how God uses and reveres women. He doesn't hold them in contempt, but instead He raises them up. This importance of the testimony of women - her place, she was expected to just learn and be in silence. Aren't we glad how times have changed!

The Bible tells us that with their mission accomplished celebrating His 'bris' the time of circumcision, Mary and Joseph returned to Bethlehem. Ahead of them would be the threat by Herod to kill all male children two years of age and under, they would flee to Egypt because of a message that Joseph received in a dream, and then twelve years later they would return to the Temple for Jesus' Bar Mitzvah. Indeed, the words of Simeon would become true for the whole world - "*For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples.*" (Luke 2:30-31)

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. His Name was blessed from the very beginning, and continues to be blessed today. His Name means so much, and carries strength and power like no other name. A person's name is their identity, their word, their bond. What is it that you do when you have a document – a legal document? You sign – your name! Many times in order to make sure that it is you – you have to have your signature notarized; your name becomes your identity, your legal identity and this is very important. A name means so very much; it is not only your identity but it carries along with it your integrity. You can find out a lot about a person through their name – both first and last. For example – sometimes a name is passed down through generations – my grandfather, who was born in Waterford, Ireland, and his name was John Edward Joseph Commins and when my father was born in Brooklyn, NY - he was given the name John Edward Joseph Commins. When I was born – guess what I got? John Edward Joseph Commins – a family tradition continued. – I gave the name to my son, John. I broke part of the family tradition – because we wanted to honor someone else - we wanted to honor Marilyn's father – Eric – and so our son is John Eric Commins. It will be up to him to decide as he passes that name on. Middle names can mean a lot too. It is a current tradition for folks to give the last name of a beloved relative as a middle

name, or a maiden name. It is a beautiful tradition because names are so very important. Think of your own families and how those names honor people – past and present. Jesus was called “Jesus of Nazareth,” “Yeshua bar Joseph – Jesus son of Joseph,” “Jesus the Christ, or Jesus the Messiah – in Hebrew ‘Yeshua ha Mashiach.’” Christ is NOT Jesus’ last name. There is power and truth in a person’s name. Let’s see what some Scripture has to say about Jesus’ Name.

Acts 4:12 *“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”*

John 14:13-14 *“And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”*

Romans 10:13 *“for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.””*

The Apostles cried out to God in prayer after being released by the Sanhedrin: (Acts 4:30) *“Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”*

Peter and John were on their way into the Temple and saw a beggar who was crippled. (Acts 3:6) *“Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.””* The people who witnessed this amazing miracle were astonished – so Peter told them: (Acts 3:16) *“By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.”*

On the night before Jesus died, in the upper room, shortly after telling the disciples (John 14:6) *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”* He gave them words of comfort and promise by saying (John 14:26 NIV) *“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”*

There is so much more. You could just go through the New Testament and be astounded because of the power, peace, love and healing comes through the Name of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:9-11 assures us of the power and magnificence of the Name of Jesus which we celebrate today: *“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*