

# THE POWER OF NAMES

AND AT THE END OF EIGHT DAYS, WHEN HE WAS CIRCUMCISED, HE WAS CALLED JESUS, THE NAME GIVEN BY THE ANGEL BEFORE HE WAS CONCEIVED IN THE WOMB. LUKE 2:21

Today we remember the day, eight days after Christmas, when Mary and Joseph named their child Jesus. Names can be very important. Our son Narek's middle name is Alexander, named after his grandfather. Many of you are surely named after beloved relatives, and in some way carry on the lives of those passed. Others of us may have been named after a beloved friend of the family who was not a relative. Many of you may know that Ida Varadian was named after Ida Merakyan, as their families were close and Ida's Varadian's parents loved and admired Ida Merakyan. Their common names stand as a reminder of their family's closeness.

Certainly people of Jesus' time understood the importance of names, including Joseph and Mary as they approached the temple to give their son a name. In this time, they didn't name people like we do now, because it sounds good or because we like the name of someone famous. Children were named after male parents and grandparents, so that their history, lineage, even the family profession would be passed down a generation in the very name of the child. It was really Joseph's right to name his child Joseph, just like it was Zeccheriah's right to name his and Elizabeth's child after him in the preceding chapter of Luke's gospel. Neither man would get their due, however, as angel's announce to Zechariah that his son would be named John, which means God is graceful, and they announce to Joseph that his would be named Jesus, meaning God saves. These two children, it seems would decidedly not carry on the past lineage of their earthly fathers, but would carry forward the future lineage of their heavenly father to all his children.

In other words, Zeccheriah and Joseph's loss was our gain. Because today on the feast of the naming of Jesus, we are reminded of two extraordinary things that were gifted to us in the naming of Jesus-'God saves.' The first is the continuation of the profound Christmas mystery, that God was born and named at all. Recall that one of the Ten Commandments is dedicated to the sanctity of the Name of God. The name of God is so holy that it is not said or pronounced. God is not to be depicted. Approaching God in the Holy of Holies was punishable by death. The naming of Jesus reminds us of the extraordinary *Avedis* of Christ's coming to us in love, that God would choose to become human and vulnerable. God would choose to be named, and therefore often mis-named, mis-understood and mis-used, yet also accessible and knowable to the humble seeker in deeper ways than ever before. We assume that the Son of God has always had a name His Father called him from the beginning of time, but in the naming of Jesus, we are allowed to approach God on a first name basis.

So the first miracle of Jesus' naming was that he was named at all. The second miracle is that God's naming of Jesus is also a calling, which lifts up Jesus and all of God's children. Remember on this feast of the naming of Jesus, that God's naming of things is how the world began. Recall that God formed the world by words, by naming; "let there be light"! And in this way all of creation came into being, including humankind, the pinnacle of his creation.

With the naming of Jesus, God's creative naming continued, such that God reforms the creation he formed. This is the deepest meaning of the name Jesus, 'God saves.' It's like a call and response where God calls all of creation and each of us into being and then all of creation responds back to the call of God. How do we do this? Just by being our deepest self. God doesn't create, then name and then find some role for you and I to fulfil. Our vocation is to be where we are, what we are, and who we are. And this loving call into being is there from the beginning for each and every one of us. "The Lord called me from the womb," we read from the prophet Isaiah during baptisms (49:1b) "from the body of my mother he named my name."

Many of us have received our names from parents or given our own kids names with an eye to bringing our heritage and memories of loved ones past into the present. This is as it should be. But today on the feast of the naming of Our Lord, let us remember that the power of names is stronger than the past and higher than the heavens. For we believe that God has come to know us intimately by name in Jesus, and that each moment of our lives our heavenly Father calls us forward to live up to and into our names as children of the God who saves, now and always; amen.