

*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.*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What do you think of when you hear the term, “christening”?

For some people, christening and Baptism are interchangeable terms. The Church of England states that there is no difference between Baptism and Christening. Yet there is a difference. Christening refers to the naming of the child, which in some traditions is done apart from Baptism. The child would be anointed with oil (called “chrism”, by the way) and their name would be given to note that they are part of God’s family. This naming is not something that is commanded in Scripture, whereas Baptism is instituted by Christ, who commands us to *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”* (Matthew 28:19–20a, ESV) Paul calls Baptism *“the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,”* (Titus 3:5, ESV) Peter compares Baptism to Noah and the flood, and says: *“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”* (1 Peter 3:21, ESV)

While we may not practice christening, we do incorporate the name of the person into the gift God gives us in our Baptism. As the person is baptized we call them by name, and I can tell you that there are those who have a name different from what their parents picked, because the pastor spoke the wrong name at the baptism. Jeremiah spoke of the Messiah’s deliverance and said: *“In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”* (Jeremiah 33:16, ESV) That name—‘The LORD is our righteousness’—is ours in our Baptism. We are “christened” when we are baptized, to the extent that God places His name on us. We place the sign of the cross on those baptized to mark them as one redeemed by Christ the crucified, and we remember that we bear this name every time we make the sign of the holy cross. What a blessed name we are given in our Baptism!

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. John Chrysostom strongly encouraged parents to choose for their children names of holy men and women known for their strength, virtue and faith, in order that the children might look to them as role models. This practice is carried on by the Roman church when young people choose a saint’s name at their confirmation. When our children were born, we wanted names that reflected the family, but more importantly, we wanted biblical names that reflected our faith.

There was a time when names were much more descriptive, a time when an individual’s name was chosen or even changed to make a specific statement or declaration about that person. This was a very common practice in biblical times. And so Abram, whose name means “exalted father”, is given a new name—Abraham, which means “father of many”. All of Jacob’s sons have names that reflect their mothers’ reactions to their births, such as Reuben, a name which sounds like the Hebrew word for “He has seen my misery”, coming from the fact that his mother, Leah, felt she was not loved, because Jacob loved Rachel more. And when Rachel, who envies her sister’s children, finally gives birth, she calls her son Joseph, which means “may He add”, a prayer that God would give her another son.

*“What’s in a name?”*, asks Juliet in Shakespeare’s play, *Romeo and Juliet*. In our world today we use names and labels all the time in order to identify people and things—but those names are not necessarily special in themselves. Shakespeare said: *“Would not a rose by any other name still smell as sweet?”* But St. Paul reminds us that there is one name that stands out above all the others. He writes: *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.* (Philippians 2:9-11 - ESV) Today is the day in the Christian calendar when we remember that Jesus was circumcised, in accordance with Jewish law. In this fulfilment of God’s law for His people, the Son of God begins His work of salvation. Circumcision was also the time of naming the child, and as the angel had told Mary and Joseph, they gave Him the name Jesus. Today we come together in that name, the name given to our Saviour and Redeemer before His birth; the name that declares both who Jesus is and what He has done for us, for Jesus is what the name Jesus means: He is the Lord, our Saviour.

Throughout our worship today we have made reference to various names and titles that rightly belong to Jesus Christ. We rejoice that He is Emmanuel, God with us. He is our Redeemer, the One who has bought us back from sin, death and hell. The prophet Isaiah tell us: ***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*** (Isaiah 9:6 - ESV) In every name that we use for the child of Mary, who is the Eternal Son of God, we bear witness to some marvellous aspect of God's grace and love given to us in the gift of His Son.

We rejoice in that name that is above every name—or more precisely, we rejoice in Him who truly lives up to His name. Jesus is our Saviour. As we stand at the beginning of a new year, we pray for God's blessings on the coming days. We seek His blessings because we do not know what lies before us. Will it be a good year? Will it be a time of struggle, sorrow, or loss? Will we share in some wonderful good news? Will this be the year of the Lord's return? We can go boldly and confidently into this new year, for we know the marvel and blessing of Christmas, that the Lord of heaven and earth has come into our world to save us. We may be tempted at times to take for granted His holy, precious gift. We may not give any thought to His loving sacrifice as He offers Himself in our place on the cross. Instead of rejoicing in the name of Jesus, we abuse His name. For far too many people the name is not important today. They use the name of Jesus as a means of adding emphasis to an oath or a curse. How different is the attitude of our day toward the name of Jesus than that of Peter, who said: ***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.*** (Acts 4:12 - ESV)

Jesus is given the name, "Jesus", because He is the only One who is the God who saves us. Sadly, even though Jesus Himself says: ***"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"*** (John 14:6, ESV), there is an increasingly unbiblical belief among many Christians that God is pleased by worship that comes from those outside the Christian faith. When a survey last year asked people to agree or disagree to the statement, "God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.", 56% of evangelical Christians agreed with this statement. In our relativistic world, and with our Canadian version of multiculturalism, we find it hard to accept that there is one name that is different; that there is only one true God; that there is only one who can be called our Saviour.

Other religions may revere the name of some saviour, but those saviours don't save for eternity; all they do is tell people how they can save themselves. They don't accomplish salvation for their followers. There is no other deity, no other prophet, no one else you can name who comes to take our place and suffer our punishment. But Jesus is different. The One whose name is *the Lord Saves* lives up to His name because He actually saves all those who trust in Him. In His circumcision, He is joined under the law with the people He came to save. His blood is shed for us, as it will later be shed for us on the cross. He suffers for us and yes, He dies in our place, bearing in His body the death we deserve. But He also lives up to His name as He rises again from the dead, to save His people from sin, death and hell forever.

One day a young soldier was brought to trial before Alexander the Great. He wore the tunic of Alexander's army. "What is the charge?" he asked. "He is charged with cowardice in battle," answered the prosecutor. A great hush fell over the crowd in the judgment hall. They knew that Alexander expected bravery from his men and hated cowardice. He looked at the young soldier, a mere youth, fair-haired and still too young to shave. "What is your name, soldier?" "Worthy King, my name is as yours: "Alexander." An angry scowl came over Alexander's face. He leaped to his feet, grabbed the soldier's tunic and shouted, "Young soldier, either change your name, or change your behaviour."

Jesus lives up to that wonderful name given to Him before His birth. The One who is the Lord our Saviour cannot and will not deny His name. He is everything His name says He is. When we come together in our worship, we begin in the name of the Triune God, remembering with joy the blessed name of Jesus as we make the sign of the cross. As we confess our sins I have the command and the privilege to declare to you in His name the forgiveness of your sins, just as Jesus told His disciples before His ascension: ***"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*** (Luke 24:46-47 - ESV) When we are baptized, we are baptized into the name of the Triune God, and joined with Christ, so that His name is also our name, as we are brought forgiveness and life through His saving work. And when we come to the Lord's table, we come in the name of the Lord to feast on the very body and blood of the Lord, who says: ***"This is my body: this is My blood"***.

Mary and Joseph are told to name her child Jesus. In accordance with God's will, that name is given. Now we rejoice in that blessed name and all that it means for us. We go forth into this new year in the name of Jesus. We pray in His name, confident that our Father in heaven hears and blesses us. As the hymn writer says: ***Jesus! Name of wondrous love, Human name of God above; Pleading only this, we flee Helpless, O our God, to Thee.*** (LSB 99, st. 6) Amen.