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Holy Name

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In the early 1980's, Hollywood producers were attending the Broadway show *Preppies* when they heard the song they thought was perfect for their new TV sitcom. But the producers of *Preppies* refused to sell the lyrics for the song titled *People Like Us*. So, the Hollywood producers hired the original song writers – Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart-Angelo - to write new words to the same tune. Neither Gary nor Judy had written a song before writing *People Like Us*, yet the producers and creators of the upcoming TV show believed they could capture the essence of the show about a cast of characters that owned and frequented a watering hole in Boston.

After quite a few attempts were rejected, Gary and Judy began to lose heart. However, the creators and producers believed in them, and gave them as much time as they needed to find the words they were searching for. As Gary recalls, it wasn't so much finding the words that was challenging, it was getting into the state of mind for the words to find him. After more failed attempts, one afternoon he was sitting at his piano playing the opening bars of the song and thinking about the type of people the song was about: people who face struggles, who try to get by but often don't, yet are genuinely good people. He thought about what a person like that might want. An escape? Not quite. A place to rest? Certainly, but what makes a place restful? What makes a place one where an outsider became an insider? A place where they mattered. A place of welcome, sort of like every Episcopal parish promises on the signs we put outside our church buildings that proclaims, "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You".

As Gary reflected on what makes a place welcoming, it came to him: a place where everybody knows your name. After that, the words came effortlessly. Perhaps, if you watched TV in the early 1980's you already know the words to the *Cheers* theme song: *Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got, taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot, sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came, sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name.*

In 2013 this song was voted the best TV theme song. Perhaps because instead of being urgently upbeat, as if trying to force the listener to feel something, the *Cheers* theme song has an intimate feel to it and anybody can relate to the hopeful promise of a welcome where no one is a stranger, where everyone is happy to see you, where everybody knows your name.

Our names are an important part of us, as individuals and as families. Most parents spend a great deal of time carefully considering the name they will give to their child. People also consider what name they will give a pet. There is power in giving a name, and sometimes there can be a lot that goes with a name, like the legacy or reputation of the parent or family. Sometimes close friends or spouses give each other special names nick names only they use when they are together as a sign of their intimate or collegial relationship. Other times we use formal names as a sign of respect. Names matter, and Jesus' name is no different.

Today the Church reflects on the name of Jesus; not because it is the first day in the calendar year, but because it is eight days after the celebration of his birth, which makes today the eighth day of Christmas. As we heard in the Gospel, that was the traditional time for a child to receive their name.

Linguists and scholars among us can tell us the name translated Jesus in our Bibles was pronounced Yehashua in the language spoken at the time the Gospels were written and when Jesus lived. The name Jesus is usually said to mean "God saves" and the name Yehashua is more literal: "Yahweh is salvation." Remember, Yahweh was the word used for God because it was believed God's name was too sacred to say out loud. But the actual meaning of Jesus' name may not be the point of today's celebration. At the time, the name Yehashua was quite common, a reflection of the hope people had for God to rescue them once again from oppression.

There is nothing in today's Gospel that says the significance of Jesus' name is in its meaning. Instead, the author of the Gospel tells us the significance is in who gave Jesus his name. It wasn't from Joseph or Mary. Today's Gospel reminds us it was an angel who told Mary and Joseph what to name Jesus before he was born. Which means God gave Jesus his name.

He wasn't the only one. There are other people in the Bible who received their names from God before they were born, such as Moses or John the Baptist. These people had uniquely personal relationships with God. But there are other ways people received names from God. Sometimes God changed a person's name to indicate a change in their role or relationship. This is an essential part of the story of Abram, who left his life and the safety and comfort in the city of Ur to follow God's call to go into the wilderness to learn how to be close to God and fulfill God's promise to make a new people through him. It took Abram a long time to learn to trust God, and one of the high points of his story when God changed Abram's name to Abraham to symbolize their relationship and Abraham's role in fulfilling God's

plan. What is often missed but is just as significant is at the same time God changed Abram's name, God also changed his wife Sarai's name to Sarah, which indicates her role in the founding of a new people is equal to that of her husband.

These name changes can be found in the Gospels and Book of Acts too, such as when Jesus changed the name of Simon to Peter and Saul changed his name to Paul after changing from persecuting those who followed Jesus to following Jesus himself.

God is still changing names today. When a person is baptized, we are baptized in the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, making us part of the Church, not the institution but the community, the family of God through Jesus. In our other readings for today we are told we are given the name of Jesus in our baptism. This doesn't replace our personal names; it is added to it. We are adopted into God's family through the name of Jesus, through his death and resurrection we too are now part of the resurrection life, because his name is our name too.

Resurrection life isn't quite like the bar in the TV sitcom *Cheers*, but it is welcoming, healing, restoring, and forgiving; not because of what we have or have not done, but because we bear the name of Jesus.

This means wherever we go and whatever we do, we bring that resurrection life of Christ with us. When we are at our best, that resurrection life shines through us when we empathize with others, when we forgive, when do what we can to make room for the holy in our midst, when we love God and each other, whenever we live into our name by helping people feel closer to God.

As we begin a new calendar year in the middle of the season of Christmas, we all know too well that making our way in the world is far from easy, it takes a lot, maybe everything we've got, as a parish and as individuals. Whether you are anxious about 2023 or sad or looking forward to what a new year might bring, today we can perhaps find some rest and restoration in the reminder that no matter what happens in this new year we will not be alone, God is and will be with us. Because God not only knows our name, God has given us the best name God can give us, the name of God's love, the name of Jesus, who delights in sharing his name with us so that we can make his name known in the world.