

Year A The Naming of the Lord Luke 2 vv15 to 21

Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. This is a very different response than what we see in the shepherds. The shepherds are jubilant – they return to the hillside, rejoicing, praising and glorifying God for all they had seen and heard. Mary, though, is quiet. Luke doesn't tell us that she even says anything at all in response to the arrival of the shepherds and their recounting of their encounter with an angel.

Their encounter with the angel would have reinforced her encounter with an angel – when Gabriel broke the news to her that she would bear a son and name him “Jesus”. Gabriel had told her, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1.32-33). As I mentioned last week, Caesar Augustus – and the rulers before him – called himself the son of a god and now, if Mary had any thoughts that her son, Jesus, was to be only an earthly king like other kings before him, the shepherds add clarification: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Her son was to be more than King David ever was. Her son is the Messiah, the Lord. Her son – the Messiah, the Lord – the long-expected One who would fix all of the world's brokenness, right all of the wrongs, restore equality and true justice, bringing the Day of the Lord when God's kingdom would be fulfilled “on earth as in heaven.” Her son...It is no small wonder that she had nothing to say. She needed to process the shepherds' confirmation of her highest hopes and, perhaps her greatest fear – her son is the Messiah. She treasured these words and pondered them in her heart.

Like all other obedient Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph circumcised and officially named their son on the eighth day after his birth – today. This naming is very different from the naming of his cousin, John the Baptist, which comes right before this story. Elizabeth gives her child the name John. The people gathered are surprised, perhaps a little disturbed by this breach of protocol because it is the father who is supposed to name the child. Zechariah agrees with his wife: his name is John, he says. In contrast, in the naming of the child we hear today, Luke does not say Mary named him. Luke does not say Joseph named him. “He was named Jesus,” is what Luke writes. This reinforces for us that God, not the earthly parents, is the authoritative source of the name. And that name is Jesus.

Jesus – God Saves. The name contains both the Holy Name of God and God’s mission. From Gabriel and from the angel who spoke to the shepherds we learn more of what this name involves. Jesus is Son of the Most High, Son of God, Saviour, Messiah, and Lord. From Mary, herself, earlier in Luke’s Gospel we hear exactly what God’s mission is when she sings to Elizabeth what we now call the Magnificat: God’s mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation, she sings. God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. In all things, God fulfills his promise of perfection.

As the readers and hearers of this Gospel story that took place so long ago, we know what the other people in the story do not know. We know the rest of Jesus’ story, his earthly ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and where we now stand in light of his second coming. The shepherds knew none of this and so, we

can appreciate their response all the more. Confronted by an angel, serenaded by a heavenly host, told of the birth of the Messiah, they reacted to what they saw and heard with genuine curiosity, trust, and active obedience. I am quite sure that, if I had had the same experience as the shepherds, I would have believed but who would then have believed me? Most people I tried to tell would likely think I made up the whole thing or think that I was genuinely delusional. But the shepherds excitedly told all they came across what the angel had said to them and, we are told, all were amazed by what they said. The shepherds believed the good news and went in haste to Bethlehem to share their belief. How fitting it is that a group of shepherds should be the ones bringing the good news of the Messiah of the line of David in the very city where David, himself, grew up as a shepherd.

The shepherds became messengers of the good news, rejoicing in this good news, praising and glorifying God, forever changed because they heard, they saw, they believed, and then they shared. Like the shepherds, we are called to proclaim the good news – not only with our lips but in our lives...called to proclaim the good news until he comes again. The good news found within Jesus' name – “God saves” – is desperately needed in our broken world. We are to sing Mary's song – the Magnificat – to a downtrodden world. The good news is not about saving individual souls. It is not enough that “I” believe. That's only part of it. The good news – “God saves” – is that God saves the world. Each individual soul works together with God to change what is broken: scatter the proud in their thoughts, bring down the powerful, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry, and send away those too enamoured with the world's riches to embrace God's riches.

We can do this because we have even more than what the shepherds had. In addition to knowing the rest of Jesus' story we were made a part of that story. We are not simply readers or hearers of the Gospel story, we became characters in that story, participants in the story on the day of our baptism. We now live that story along with Jesus because we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are clothed in Christ's righteousness, marked as Christ's own forever. We bear Christ's name and carry the Name of Jesus within us and that name has power.

Luke tells us many times over that the apostles teach, preach, and heal in the name of Jesus – in other words, *because of* the name of Jesus. They are able to do what they do because of Jesus' name. There is power in the name of Jesus and we carry that power “working in us, doing more than we can ask or imagine.” Paul tells us that we are to have the same mind in us as was in Christ Jesus. That is the mind of someone selfless and completely obedient to God's word. Being obedient to God's word means living life the way that it is supposed to be in God's perfect kingdom. God's laws, when followed, bring people into right relationship with God and with each other. Jesus lived that life so completely, so obediently, that it resulted in his death. And Paul is encouraging us to live as Jesus did – loving others the world does not love, including others, fighting against corrupt power and oppression. We do some of this but there is always more to be done. A sociologist wrote in response to the sickening attack and murder of a Toronto homeless man by a group of young teenage girls. He says we should not be surprised that such a horrific attack ended up happening since, sadly, the majority of Canadians think of the homeless as worthless, lazy, as having mental health issues, or addictions. As much as some people try to change the stereotypes held for people with addictions, people with mental health issues, people without

homes...these stereotypes are firmly embedded in society's thinking. There is actually a website for why we should not help the homeless. This website spews such nonsense as "The homeless get so much help that they actually like being homeless." Homelessness...poverty... is just one area of brokenness in our society. Like the shepherds, we are not called only to believe, we are called into action and there is a lot to be done.

In case we forget that we carry the Holy Name of Jesus, in case we forget what this means for the way in which we live, our worship services always end with a blessing and sending. This blessing is truly remarkable. When God instructs Moses and Aaron in the blessing they are to say to the Israelites, God says: "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." They shall put my name on the Israelites. The blessing puts God's name on us, God's people. Let's let that sink in...The blessing puts God's name on us and God's name has power.

When we leave here, we carry the name of God – and its power – into the world. The sending then tells us what we are to do with that Name – to love and to serve the Lord. How we do that and even *if* we do that, is up to us. May we choose to be as the shepherds...going into the world rejoicing, praising and glorifying God.