

Luke 2:21

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Name of Jesus, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 27 December 2011

This is a very interesting Sunday. The Gospel for today used to be the text for the third day of Christmas, and that is still true in Europe, in Germany, where Christmas is celebrated for three days. This year the Sunday after Christmas happens to coincide with the Name of Jesus, and so we've got the old Gospel: Luke 2:21. "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb."

So we have the name of Jesus. But the name is being used here in a biblical rather than a contemporary sense. We have names primarily as labels: Ted and Jane and Jim and Bill and Jennifer and so forth. Biblically, as you know, the name also divulges something of the character. When Moses was on the lam, trying to avoid murder charges, living out in the desert tending sheep, a voice came to him from a burning bush. Naturally enough, he wanted to know the name of the speaker. He was called to deliver God's people from bondage in Egypt, but still he pressed, and finally God answered, having fenced with him a little about it. Moses wanted a name that would divulge God's character. God was not willing to come out in the open, and so he named himself in a mystery: "I am who I am. I will be what I will be."

Here the mystery is broken open. As we saw last week in John 1, "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word became flesh and lived among us." God expressed himself in the flesh and blood of a man, in Christ Jesus. And today we find out his name. His name is Jesus. But we learn more than a label, more than simply a handle by which we can reach out and get him, as important as that is. We get insight, and more than insight: the promise of God's character as he expresses himself in Christ Jesus.

These texts are a lot of fun, just full of goodness. And because of the way they proceed, we're going to reverse the normal order. Usually when I'm with you I like to work on the preliminary texts and finish with the Gospel. But today we'll start with the Gospel, because we get the name in the Gospel. His name is Jesus, and, as we've seen, that name means he will save his people from their sins. That tells us a lot already. But each of the other texts adds some

beautiful dimension, and they are beauties, no question about it: the Aaronic benediction from Numbers 6; Psalm 8, “How majestic is your name in all the earth”; and Galatians 3:23–29. I’m very much opposed to trying to preach on all four texts; I’ve never heard anybody really succeed. But boy, these texts are tempting, because for once in their lives the people who put the texts together put three of them, four with the psalm, together in a way that really does work in harmony.

Luke 2:21: The Name Given by the Angel

So we’ll start with Luke 2:21, just one verse, then proceed to Numbers, then to Psalm 8, and finally to Galatians 3, as these texts bestow themselves in an extraordinarily promising way. This is so much fun.

Luke 2:21 is a one-liner if there ever was one: “He was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.” It’s quite interesting that we have a parallel to the passage in Matthew, but here it comes without the translation. Matthew gives a translation of the name: “He will save his people from their sins.” Luke just sticks to the conception. And that by itself is important: this name was given to him by an angel.

Nowadays, of course, the temptation is always to begin with the situation and see if you can fit the text into it, a procedure I have lots of doubts about. The name of Jesus, the name of the Triune God, is treated as though it were a cipher, basically an interchangeable part. In the congregation I attend, the pastor is often quite reluctant on Sunday to use the name of the Triune God. He wants to use the doctrine instead, just as the red book does when it invokes “the Trinity,” which is not God’s name at all but the name of a doctrine. So we get various names and titles rubbed together in the hope of approximating the Trinity. It’s not as bad as in some services I’ve been to, where names are thrown up at random in the hope that someone up there will catch them and answer. That’s a little disappointing, actually. When you start in the name of the job description, in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the whatever, you never know who’s going to show up. God’s name is God’s name.

So the name Jesus is not interchangeable. It was given to him by the angel. Thus he was named by the Father and the Spirit, and named with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the proper name of the Triune God. And so when we call out his name, Jesus, when we call out to him, we can expect him to hear us and answer, as he has promised, because he recognizes that it is his name being called. In the mystery, in the uncertainty, in the kaleidoscopic reality

spinning around us, there is a name that reaches through all the confusion and identifies a person. “Call on me in the day of trouble,” and what? “I will answer you.” “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” So the name comes as the very specific name of the second person of the Trinity, the Son, in whom the Father and the Spirit have come down to earth, expressing themselves to us. That by itself would be more than enough to celebrate.

But we also have the meaning of the name, even though it’s unstated in Luke: he will save his people from their sins. This is what he does. First, we know him by name: his name is Jesus. And when we know him by name, we know what we can expect of him. When the sinner comes to Jesus, he doesn’t say, “You again? Haven’t you gotten over that yet? You dummy, you return to your past like a dog to its vomit. Come on, get a life. I died for the sins of the world, but I never had that in mind.” He doesn’t talk like that at all. He says, “I am the friend of sinners.” And when he hears us confessing and calling and seeking, he answers, “What is it? I can help you. I love sinners. I am here to deliver you.”

So we have a promise in the name, and the promise is that Jesus expresses the very character of God in giving himself away, laying himself down, blessing, bestowing, granting freely. He is giving himself for you and to you. And when he gives you his name, he promises to answer. So you have friends in high places. You have a friend in the highest place of all, who promises to hear you when you call on his name, no matter what the circumstance or situation might be. Already the gospel has started to spill here in Luke 2. But just like the good Lord, once it starts to spill, he wants it to pour.

Numbers 6: The Lord Bless You and Keep You

So we go to Numbers 6. I want to say a little about a basic difference between the assumptions we make and the assumptions Scripture makes. Since the Enlightenment we’ve been caught up in a progressive view of time. Sure, sequence is in the Scripture itself. But the fact that six o’clock comes before seven, or Christmas before New Year’s, or December before January, doesn’t mean in Scripture that what happens in January was unknown or unthought of in December.

We started with the text last week: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” So Jesus didn’t just happen along in the year zero, unthought of or unconceived beforehand. Jesus was with

the Father, is with the Father, has been with the Father. As he said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” So when we come to Numbers, we assume from the beginning that the one speaking and blessing here is Jesus. This is the Triune God expressing himself in these words, and so Jesus is finally the speaker. “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” These words are the very gospel on Christ’s lips. He is blessing you. He is giving you peace. His face is lifted up upon you and shining on you.

Whenever I think about this passage closely, I think of my mother. She died of breast cancer at fifty-six, with one grandchild, our oldest son. He just had his fortieth birthday, so it was a long time ago. I remember how she looked at him. When she was dying of cancer, he was the only one who could get through to her. She had given up. She was in despair. Her faith was under attack all the time. But it was little Andy crawling up on the bed who could bring joy to her face, as she lifted up her countenance upon him. She smiled, and that smile came right out of the center of her. That’s the blessing. It is far more than a dying woman with a grandchild, but it’s in the same league. You can see it in the lifting up of the countenance, in the making of the face to shine: the very heart of God is coming into his eyes, into his face. He is blessing. He is granting.

“The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you.” What could be more beautiful than that? It is the one who loves you absolutely, without reservation, who says when he sees you, “Oh, my own.” Just like that. More fun, and more grace than you could possibly imagine. “The Lord lift up his countenance upon you.” You’ve seen this one: the face comes up. “And give you peace.” This peace is not simply the absence of conflict or the end of a fight. It is the deepest peace, the peace that passes all understanding, the peace granted in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus: a peace that simply overwhelms and blesses and carries and sustains.

Like lots of pastors, I can tell you stories of how the benediction has led me and upheld and strengthened me in the face of death itself. When Gerhard Forde was dying, he had a rare form of Parkinson’s called Lewy body disease, and gradually his brain was turning to mush. Every once in a while there would be a moment of delicious clarity, but often it was just horrible. He simply couldn’t understand what was happening. One time, when we were together in Denmark for a meeting, before I knew how serious the disease had become, I learned the power of the benediction on a night when he was in terror. A man in the

adjoining hotel room was moaning in his sleep, and Gerhard, whose bed was right by the wall, heard that moaning and was terrified by it. I could explain, “Oh, it’s just a man moaning in his sleep,” but explanations don’t work at a time like that. In desperation I put my hand on his head and said, “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” By the time I was halfway through the benediction he was sound asleep, and he slept until the next morning. Thereafter, whenever he was at his worst, I could count on the benediction to go ahead of me, to uphold, to strengthen, to carry, even as everything was falling apart.

That’s the power of this Word. Christ Jesus is expressing himself. He is the blessing. He is actually blessing, actually lifting up his countenance, actually bestowing peace. This is the gospel itself. When you speak it, you are not speaking about some eventual possibility, something that could happen. You are actually blessing, actually bestowing, actually giving.

Another time I was with a dear friend who was dying in the intensive care unit. He was in his last moments, and I reached out, put my hand on his head, and started into the benediction. He hadn’t moved for days, but he reached up, grabbed my arm, and held my hand on his head until I had finished. And when I said, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” he passed away. That’s this Word, you see. It’s ritualized; we all know it; we’ve heard it a thousand times. But God is in this Word, working.

Psalm 8: How Majestic Is Your Name

With such a wonderful Old Testament text we get Psalm 8 to go along with it: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” This is a lot of fun, because the purpose of including this psalm is to give us a chance to exalt God’s name: to point, just as I did in those two stories, to the power of God’s name and God’s Word to bless at the bottom of life.

Psalm 8 begins there. “You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.” It’s a gorgeous passage. This is what God’s name does. It sets up a bulwark, a fortress. And when it sets up a bulwark and a fortress, it quells the enemy. It silences the avenger. It stops the avenger’s mouth. That is how God magnifies his name, as Mary knew in her magnificent song, and that is how God’s name is magnified among us. He takes on the opposition. He takes on all the godlessness and all the terror and all the sorrow. He justifies the

godless. He sets us free in a bulwark in the midst of our enemies. So here he is magnifying his name. And when we see him magnifying his name by delivering, we get a sense of how majestic his name is in all the earth, and especially, for the psalmist, in humankind.

Now, when I read the newspapers I don't necessarily think of the glory of God. It's one stupidity after the next. I don't look at the newspaper and say, "We are a little lower than the angels." Ridiculous. But in the light of God's deliverance, in the light of God's promise, we can look even at our sinfulness and sorrow and the catastrophe we make of things and say, "How majestic is your name in all the earth!" Because this is the name above every name: the name to which we turn, on which we call, from which we expect good things, which we can count on even when reading about the latest travails in Washington, DC, or Pakistan, or Israel, or wherever. This is the name above every name, known particularly in saving his people from their sins.

If we haven't got enough here, good night. You could preach on the benediction forever. And Psalm 8, holy smokes: it's reminiscent of Shakespeare in its language, redolent and powerful. It's just full of good things.

Galatians 3: Now That Faith Has Come

But the framers of the lectionary have added good things to good things by giving us Galatians 3:23 and following. This is a marvelously delicious passage, but complicated, because of course the tendency is to understand it as BC and AD: "Now before faith came." The tendency is to interpret the "before" as before Christ came, in terms of time, and the "after" as after Christ came. We know all kinds of versions of the Christian faith that specialize in this, the deliverance "from vice to virtue," as Gerhard used to call it. Just listen to Lead Belly singing "Amazing Grace": "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." You'd think the before and after were chronological.

But as Paul uses these words, they are relational. Relational time and chronological time are correlated, but they are not necessarily equal. When you listen to lovers talk, you realize that the timing is not necessarily sequential; it's relational. They are speaking in the light of what's happening, and that is exactly what's happening here. "Before faith came" refers to any time in life when faith has lost its grip: when we're fearful or doubtful or caught up in our anxieties or carried away. It was like that in my little story about my mother beaming at our oldest son: the

terror of death, the sorrow, the loss, the pain, the abandonment attacked her faith. You could say she believed, and yet at the same time she was full of the terrors of unbelief.

So “before faith came,” in the circumstances of life, before faith really had its grip on us, “we were imprisoned and guarded under the law.” That’s all we could think about: what we had done and what we had failed to do, how other people have betrayed us and let us down, how nobody is faithful, how we’re left by ourselves, how we’re caught again.

Right now, while we’re doing this, one of my dear uncles is being buried out in Montana. I can’t be there, of course, and I’ve been worrying all day about my dear auntie, my godmother. I can imagine the thoughts of her heart as she buries the one she has loved. I was the ring bearer at their wedding, for crying out loud, and here it is almost sixty years later and she is burying him. When the heart is overwhelmed by such sorrow, when a person is just caught, that is the time before faith came.

But when faith takes hold, everything starts over again. When faith does not exert its grip, the law comes. The law starts reciting lists of indictments, making its complaints and demands, telling us how we’ve let ourselves down and let everybody else down: if only you people applied yourselves, if only you worked harder at this. All you get is Moses: law, law, law, and no end of law.

“But now that faith has come.” This is a different kind of now. Usually when we say “before” and “now,” the two are mutually exclusive, but before and now have come together in this text. “But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian,” because now there is one who enters the conscience and tells the law to shut up. Now there is one who enters the conscience in the words of the forgiveness of sins, and entering the conscience that way says, “Mr. Law, you’re not in charge here anymore. I am. You can take a hike, take the day off. I’m in charge here now.”

So when faith comes, faith has eyes and ears for Christ. Faith turns; faith knows the name. Faith not only knows the name but trusts it. Faith looks to the name and says, “I am under attack. You’re going to have to deliver me.” And so we say with the man in the Gospels, “I believe; help my unbelief!” The law wants to turn us back on ourselves. Christ Jesus delivers us from ourselves to bring us under his grip and his power, so that, believing, we rejoice in the freedom of the gospel.

Once he has gotten started on this theme, the apostle Paul, who is so great, is just going to sing to his heart's content. "Now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian." We don't need some cosmic babysitter coming in with rules and regulations. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." The relationship is different now. The question is no longer "What do I have to do?" or "How much can I get by with?" The question is rather, "Can you tell me more of what Christ has done? And would you please speak it? And would you please keep it up for a while? I'll count on you for that."

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Look at the way that works. You're wearing him. He has become part of you. You've been washed in him, and as you have been washed in him, you will live in the freedom of the children of God. And once that freedom takes hold, all the distinctions disappear, all the ordinary ways we keep track of who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out, who's got it and who doesn't. All of that is gone. Now there is just one thing that matters, and that is Christ Jesus. "There is no longer Jew or Greek." Of course not. "There is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

"And if you belong to Christ," and of course you do, you have been baptized into him, "then you are Abraham's offspring," Abraham and Sarah's, "heirs according to the promise." This is the difference. The hireling, the hired man or the servant girl, never knows where he or she stands. Everything depends on the whim and will of the master of the house, and so uncertainty prevails. But the heir, the child of the promise, the son and the daughter blessed in Christ Jesus, can count on the parent's commitment and promise and live in the freedom that follows.

Hidden Treasures on Low Sunday

So freedom opens out of the name of Jesus. This is his nature. His name is Jesus, and what does he do with his name? When he gets loose with his name, he says things like this: "I am blessing you, and I will keep you. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you." When he gets loose, he establishes a bulwark and quells the enemy and the avenger, so that he stands shaking his fist at death and saying, "You can have him for the moment, but he's mine for eternity. You can take her now, but I'll keep her forever." That's who Jesus is. When that takes hold of you in faith, the promise takes hold.

And finally, in Galatians, we hear Jesus talking to the conscience, breaking into the evil oppressor's lair, silencing the accusation, shutting up this disciplinarian, this internal legalist who is always holding up standards and scolding and yelling and screaming. He breaks into that, and once he breaks in he starts giving and bestowing and granting and freeing in such an utterly gracious and powerful way.

This is traditionally a Low Sunday, of course, just like the first Sunday after Easter. Everybody is religioned out, I expect, and going to take Sunday off and watch another football game. But the good Lord has a way of hiding the best texts on Low Sundays: the Sunday after Christmas, the Sunday after Easter, or the Second Sunday of Easter, whatever the nomenclature is now. We get these fabulous texts, the kind you can really dig into and rejoice in. How's that? Do you want to ask some questions?

Questions and Answers

A comment of thanks for staying close to the texts.

That's great. I'm glad to help. If we stick to these texts, we'll have a good time. You know what happened to me on Christmas Day? We had that wonderful text from John 1. I remember when my old professor taught me that text: we worked ten weeks on it and got to the seventeenth verse. And on Sunday my pastor boiled it down to this: "You are not alone." I was a little disappointed.

A question about the guardian, the disciplinarian.

Yes: guardian, disciplinarian, schoolmaster. The Greek word *paidagogos* refers to a slave assigned by a wealthy family to train the children, and of course the rule was "spare the rod and spoil the child." So the *paidagogos* has the kid by the ear and is hauling him along, the kid running on short legs trying to keep up. That's the image. But the *paidagogos* is that internal voice which is pretty sure we've blown it, which has a wagging finger and says, "You jerk." The law always has this caustic edge to it and is always after us. So to be brought from the before to the now is a rivalry, a competition, where two voices are speaking. And finally, when the gospel gets loose, it silences that voice. It says, "You shut up. This one belongs to me. You leave him alone." And when that voice speaks, it is Christ Jesus.

A comment on the pressures of the season.

Oh, sure. Think of all the demands on people at this time of year to make it a super Christmas, to fulfill the cultural expectations. This is the time of year when the guns come out, when suicide becomes attractive for a lot of people, because it seems better to silence the voice with a gun than to live with the condemnation all the time. Jeepers. You just ache. Late last night I had a call from another friend. We were talking about a close friend who is dying and for whom this voice has just taken over. The other man is a psychiatrist, and we were crying, trying everything we could think of to break through that voice and finally speak the gospel in a way that takes hold. This is the nature of it. This is what we're about. Christ Jesus is going to lead us into the new year, and there's nothing better than that.

I think we're going to close up and go. God's peace to you, and to whoever else is out there. We're grateful for this, and we wish you a joyous New Year. Talk to you later.

SOURCE

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Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_lptWG9f4A

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