

Holy Name Sermon  
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Today is not only New Year's Day, but also the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. Just 8 days ago, we celebrated the birth of the Christ-child, the long-awaited child whose birth had been foretold in scripture and by the Angel Gabriel. In the Gospel last week, Mary and Joseph, who were from Nazareth, were traveling to Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown, in order to be counted in a census. Mary was close to giving birth by this time, yet they could not find a place to stay within the town. So an innkeeper took pity on the couple and allowed them to stay in his stables. And this is where Christ, God incarnate in human form, was born into the world. Amongst dirty animals in lowly circumstances.

It seems very fitting, then, that the first people to visit the Christ-child after his birth would be lowly themselves. We were told that in the region where Christ was born "there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night." And we're told that after Christ was born, an angel of the Lord appeared to some of these shepherds and told them of this miraculous birth. The angel tells them, "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." This prophecy probably would have seemed strange to them. After all, it isn't every day that a manger, basically a trough that animals eat from, is used as a crib. And they probably didn't expect that the messiah, the Lord, of all the babies born into the world, would be born in such circumstances. Yet in spite of all this, the shepherds decided that they should visit this child that the Lord had made known to them, so they traveled to Bethlehem to see him with their own eyes.

Mary and Joseph were probably surprised to see a bunch of shepherds randomly showing up to the stable in which they were staying, but they would have understood what was happening quickly as the shepherds told them of the message they had received from the angel of the Lord. After all, both Mary and Joseph had been visited by angels of the Lord who instructed them about the child Mary was to give birth to. When God has chosen Mary, the Angel Gabriel had told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Joseph received a similar message after he learned about his fiancé's pregnancy, and had made up his mind to break off the engagement. "Joseph, son of David" an angel of the Lord reassured him, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Yes, though Mary and Joseph would have been surprised at the shepherd's arrival, that surprise would have quickly turned into greater understanding of what they had been told previously by angels. This child, this child that they had been given care over, was no ordinary child, but was the long-awaited messiah.

Though on Christmas Day we celebrate the birth of the messiah that the angels foretold, today we celebrate another part of the angels' prophecy—the name that is above every name, at the hearing of which every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth—Jesus, which literally means, "God saves." It is only appropriate that Mary and Joseph would name Jesus this, not only because they were commanded to be angels of the Lord, but also because the name perfectly describes what this person, who at the time was only a tiny, helpless infant, was going to grown up to accomplish. Because Jesus, God saves, came into the world to do just that—to save. To save us from sin and death and lead us into the way of everlasting life.

Yet you may have noticed through our readings and hymns, especially during Advent, that Jesus also has another name—Emmanuel. A few weeks ago we heard this prophecy from the Book of Isaiah: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He

shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.” This prophecy, along with the angelic prophecies spoken of in the gospels, is also attributed to Jesus. But Emmanuel, rather than being Jesus’ given name, is descriptive of who Jesus was. Emmanuel means, “God with us.” And there was no way for God to be more intimately and fully with us than for God to become one of us, to become human. So Jesus, more than anything was truly Emmanuel, God with us in the world in human form, walking among us and sharing in our trials and tribulations, our joys and sorrows.

On this day we celebrate the holy name of Jesus, who is Emmanuel—God incarnate in human form who came to this earth in order to save us and to be with us in the most improbable way. And we revere Christ’s Holy Name both because it is the name of Christ and because of what the name Jesus mean to us—the forgiveness of sins, the conquering of death, the promise of the resurrection, and the assurance that God is always with us, whether in human form or not. On this day, we, as Mary did long ago when she pondered all these words in her heart, are compelled to consider all we have been told about this holy child. This child whose birth was foretold by prophets and angels. This child who was to be the King of Kings and yet was born in a lowly stable with shepherds greeting his birth. This child “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.”

Like Mary, let us treasure these words and ponder them in our heart. Let us think and pray upon the wonder and awe that comes with the knowledge that God the Son was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary—that when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death Jesus Christ shared our human nature, and lived and died as one of us to reconcile us to God, and stretched out his arms upon the cross, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. Let us think upon the holy name of Jesus, and let every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, exalting his Holy Name. And just as the shepherds did long ago, let us glorify and praise God for all that we have seen and heard. Amen