

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Holy Name of Jesus

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

What's in a name? We all have names and our names at least evoke some meaning or significance. Some of us were given names which run through our families. Some of us have names which may tell of a story or even a family tragedy. I met an African Lutheran pastor at the Lutheran Seminary in Germantown a couple of months ago who shared with me the meaning of his name. According to him, he had three older siblings who died in infancy, and so when he was born, his parents gave him a name which literally meant that this child wouldn't die but will stay alive. And alive he stayed, and is now a pastor. Some way, somehow, his parents believed that the name echoed their frustration but also their yearn for some sort of relief from having to bury their infant children. What's in a name? I have no idea why my father named me Emmanuel, but at least I know that my middle name Ato means I am a male born on Saturday.

In traditional Jewish culture, children were given names for varying reasons but to name a child meant being responsible or owning the child. A Jew doesn't change his or her name, more importantly; each name channels God's graciousness and offers a glimmer of the divine. Mary and Joseph gave Jesus no other name than the name given them by the angel. They knew whose son he was. They also understood the meaning and purpose for the name as one offering a glimmer of God to all people, and a conduit of God's salvation. Through this child, God's salvation door will be thrown open to all who longed for the redemption of God. Without knowing how this will pan out, or how the journey will end, Mary and Joseph took the initial step of this new journey with God.

St Paul in his letter to the Galatians offers a vision driven in part by his understanding of the nature of the Law and of the Jesus event. He describes his vision in terms of birth and adoption but not both. Paul recognized that all people: Jews and Gentiles alike are people born either under the Law or some other covenant to which all may be enslaved, but being adopted as children of God is one which is a gift from God. According to Paul then, by virtue of the gift of adoption as children of God, the Christians in Galatia could not interpret their relationship with God as being determined by the Law.

Paul's teaching was new, and with a sharp focus, not on old allegiances but on a new reality made possible by the savior who was also born under the law. For he too, had to go through the rite of circumcision which sets a Jew apart and on a peculiar journey with God.

For the Jew, the journey was defined by the Exodus- a journey of salvation from the burdens of slavery in Egypt into freedom. It was on this journey that they received the Law on Mount Sinai. The Law itself literally means a signpost along the road. To sin, was to leave the road, and repentance was to return back to the road. The Old Testament reading is a majestic blessing at Mount Sinai where the Jews were set to continue their journey of salvation from mountain into the wilderness to the Promised Land. Over the years, many were those who thought that their arrival at the Promised Land was a sign that the journey had ended. But the human journey with God, the journey of faith doesn't end because it has no destination. And even if it has, it has no address because it is a journey towards a deeper union with God. Being well aware of the nature of this journey, the prophets never ceased to call the people back to the path of their journey toward union with God.

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul indicates that in the fullness of time God inaugurated a new journey with the gift of God's son-Jesus. The shepherds were among the first who with joy made this journey to visit the Christ child. The journey of the shepherds is akin to all human journeys, but there is a distinction in its essence and form. The character of this journey-our journey is one of liberation from sin, setting us on a course of salvation not by virtue of our birth, for that alone is limiting; but by the gift of adoption, which in itself is accessible and available to all.

Central to the Christian story is the idea of a journey on a path or on a way. Christians themselves were first referred to as the people of the 'Way' because their disposition mirrored that of their master Jesus, whom they thought of as the 'Way'. Being on this journey with Jesus meant that he was the road and the map, our GPS if you will, guiding us through the maze of life. Being on this journey with Jesus meant that he is the one who rescues us from our inability to move forward, he is the one who snatches us out of the jaws of the tiger of our despair, he is the one who releases us from our moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Jesus is our savior because he undoes the work of "the fall" by journeying with us on a new path and a new way because he makes us new by adoption and his presence among us.

See, Paul's anger with the people of Galatia was driven by the fact that they had not only been made a new creation, but had been adopted as joint heirs with Christ, and are journeying with Christ on a new path. So why bother with the old when you have been made a new being? Paul Tillich provides this answer. "This New Being is not something that simply takes the place of the Old Being. But it is a renewal of the Old which has been corrupted, distorted, split and almost destroyed. But not wholly destroyed. Salvation does not destroy creation: but it transforms the Old Creation into a New one."

The idea of God's salvation and benevolence is what causes the Psalmist to wonder, "What is man that you should be mindful of him? The son of man that you should seek him out?" What is man that you should dare to save him or her? But it is such knowledge and self-understanding that we do not deserve the gift of salvation, and yet, and yet, through the power and name of Jesus, God in His wisdom offers that gift to us, is that very knowledge that generates the immense joy in each of us. Marianne Meye Thompson writes that "Joy, or rejoicing, is the proper response to, and occasioned by, God's saving activity."

Our joy is a response to this dogma. Many of us feel uncomfortable about the word dogma. But the most important dogma we have to grapple with is the one which holds that Jesus Christ is the word to us in a word beyond words. G.K. Chesterton wrote that there are only two kinds of people: "Those who accept dogmas and know it, and those who accept dogmas and don't know it." I need us to consider this, if we would live, we must follow the way of death and resurrection, not as a work or a spiritual exercise but as an act of love. We can make this act of love only in so far as we know that we are loved. The truth is, we can love only if we are loved. The most challenging part of all dogmas is to believe that we are loved just as we are, and the most demanding is to accept that we are accepted.

This to me is what being adopted means: that God through his Christ accepted us and began a journey with us on a new way. He didn't ask who we are, where we come from, where we've been, what our names are or what they mean, in fact it really didn't matter if we had one at all, he simply gave off himself for us-making us a new people, a new creation. Each New Year begins with new resolutions, and as we begin a New Year, may we reflect on our journey and resolve to stay on the path of a deeper union with God. Welcome to the New You! Happy New Year. Amen.