

Feast of the Holy Name

Jan. 1, 2017

St. James Episcopal Church, Wheat Ridge

Texts: [Numbers 6:22-27](#), [Psalm 8](#), [Galatians 4:4-7](#), [Luke 2:15-21](#)

By the Rev. Becky Jones

This past week, I started thinking about  
all the animals who have called my house “home”  
over the past 30 years.

There have been a lot of them,  
including 16 dogs,  
not counting the 8 Australian shepherd puppies  
who were born at my house  
and lived there until they were adopted;  
11 cats;  
two guinea pigs  
and two iguanas.

I believe that adds up to 38 critters.

Some of them lived there only a brief time,  
only a few months to a few years.  
I was their “foster mother,” if you will.  
I was never more than a temporary caregiver.  
They came to me because they had nowhere else to go  
and I took them in because I was asked to.

But others – two of the cats and six of the dogs –  
weren’t foster animals,  
they were MY animals, MY pets.  
I chose them,  
and their adoption was not out of necessity,  
but out of desire.  
When I adopted them,  
it was with the expectation  
that it would be forever,  
til death do us part.

I like to think  
that I've been just as good a care provider to my foster pets  
as I have been to my adoptive pets.  
They've all been loved and well-treated.

But I've identified at least two ways  
in which I have treated the eight adoptive pets  
differently than the others.  
For one, when a foster animal got sick,  
I would take it to the small vet clinic not far from my house.  
It provides adequate veterinary care,  
but as with so much in life,  
when it comes to the quality of vet care,  
you get what you pay for.  
That little vet clinic is inexpensive, but it's pretty bare bones.  
They never sent me reminders  
when it was time to get somebody's teeth cleaned  
or time for someone's wellness check.

But the eight, MY eight,  
from the day they were adopted,  
became patients at Wheat Ridge Animal Hospital.  
If you have any pets, you know,  
Wheat Ridge is one of the finest veterinary facilities in the state.  
It's also one of the most expensive.  
But when it's your very own pet, your family member,  
you don't settle for second-rate. You want the best.

The other way that my treatment of the eight  
has been different from my treatment of the other 30  
involves their names.  
The foster animals – with the exception of the newborn puppies –  
all came to me with names, which I didn't change.  
They kept the names they came with –  
though I admit I did change the spelling of one that I thought was absurd.

But for the animals I adopted,  
naming them was a significant part of the process.  
They all came with original names that I changed.  
I didn't want them to have the name that someone else had given them.

I wanted them to have the name that I gave them.  
 In naming them, they became fully mine.  
 My pets.  
 My responsibility.  
 Mine.  
 Nobody else's.  
 Mine.  
 Forever.

Giving someone or something a name is an awesome power –  
 and an awesome responsibility.  
 It is not to be taken lightly.

Not only that,  
 it has long been thought  
 that names carry with them  
 the power to influence the person or thing being named.  
 For countless generations,  
 people have chosen the names of their children carefully,  
 because they want that name to describe  
 some aspect of the child's identity.  
 A good name says something about who the parents hope that child will  
 become.

Now in the Bible,  
 there's a lot of naming and re-naming that goes on.  
 In Genesis, God named the light "day" and the darkness "night."  
 God called the sky "heaven," and the dry land "earth" and the waters "seas."

Genesis goes on to tell us  
 that the first human was fashioned in God's image  
 from the dust of the soil.  
 God called this creature "Adam,"  
 because the word "adam" means "from the dirt."  
 The name conveys important information  
 about where this creature came from.

But then, God decides to share with Adam  
 the power of naming,  
 a power that up to this point had been strictly God's alone.

There is a delightful midrash in Jewish folklore,  
based on Psalm 8, which we said together this morning.

The angels ask a question of God:  
“What is man, that you should be mindful of him?”  
And God answers them,  
“The human I want to create  
will possess wisdom that shall exceed yours.”  
And then, assembling all the animals,  
God made them to pass before the angels,  
and asked them, “What are the names of these?”  
The angels didn’t know.

But when God created Adam,  
and made the animals pass before the man  
and asked him what the names were,  
Adam replied,  
“This should be called an ox; that, a lion; that, a horse; that, an eagle,”  
and so on.  
Adam named all the animals.  
And God then gave dominion over the animals to humans.  
That’s an example of the power of naming.

As I said, good names give us an insight into someone’s character.  
This is why God has a habit of changing people’s names  
to better reflect who they are.  
You’ll recall that God changes the patriarch’s name  
from Abram, which means “father,”  
to Abraham, which means “father of *many*,”  
to better reflect that man’s destiny.  
God changed his wife’s name from Sarai, which means “quarrelsome,”  
to Sarah, which means “princess,”  
because she was to be the mother of a nation.

Christ changes his disciple Simon’s name to Peter, meaning “rock,”  
and Peter went on to become the rock on which the church was founded.

Speaking of names, we think we know God’s name.  
At least, it’s the name spoken to Moses from the burning bush.

Best we can tell it's pronounced Yahweh, or, in English, Jehovah.  
 It means "I am what I am."  
 That's a good name for God.

I can stand up here and say God's name because I'm not Jewish.  
 But many Jews simply will not speak God's name or write it.  
 They feel they are not worthy to do so.  
 So they have other names that refer to God,  
 such as Elohim, which means "strong god,"  
 or Adonai, which is translated "Lord."

This was the culture into which Jesus was born.  
 It was a world that knew only a God that was so distant  
 that God's name could not even be spoken.  
 It was the God who had warned Moses not to look at the divine face,  
 or else Moses would die.  
 The prophet Ezra told the people  
 they couldn't even lift their faces to heaven  
 because they *were not worthy to be seen* by God.

I don't know whether this was truly what God intended all along,  
 or whether somehow, along the way,  
 humankind got all mixed up about just who and what God is,  
 and what God expects of us.  
 Regardless, it seems clear to me that this relationship between God  
 and the creatures made in God's image  
 wasn't working too well.  
 Everything God tried to gain these people's love,  
 and to get them to love each other,  
 it all failed.  
 Nothing was working.

Until God tried a new approach.  
 As St. Paul tells us in this morning's reading from the letter to the Galatians,  
 "When the fullness of the time came,  
 God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,  
 in order to redeem those who were under the law,  
 that we might receive adoption as children."

God's new strategy was to approach us in an entirely different way,  
as one of us.

And from that day on,  
we occupied a different place in God's created order.  
We went from being subjects of a distant God  
whose name we were not even worthy to speak  
to being children of the living God.

To do this, God came into this world as a baby.  
A helpless little baby.  
And eight days later, his parents – his human parents –  
gave him a name.  
It was the name the angel told them to name him, I grant you.  
But for the first time, humans were given the power to name God.

And his name was called Jesus.  
The name we pronounce as Jesus  
is the Anglicized form of the Greek name Yesous (Yay-soos),  
which in turn represents the Hebrew name Yeshua, or Joshua,  
which means "salvation."  
It is the same name that was given to that other Joshua,  
the successor of Moses,  
who delivered his people into the Promised Land.  
It was a good name for someone destined to be the savior of humankind.

Think what that means,  
that God gave to humankind the power to name God.  
It means God has willingly shared  
the divine power to create  
– and to name that creation – with us.  
Humans have become co-creators alongside God.  
Through the transforming power of divine grace,  
we have taken on God's divinity,  
and God has taken on our humanity.

Now we are God's family.  
We are the adopted children.  
Fully God's.  
God's.  
Nobody else's.

God's.  
Forever.  
Amen.