

Divergence on the Lectionary - Holy Name

First Reading

Numbers 6:22–27

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

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.

“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”
(ESV)

Second Reading

Galatians 4:4–7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (ESV)

Or,

Philippians 2:5–11

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 2:15–21

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

Introduction

When I finished writing the Divergences for Christmas I had a fair bit of momentum built up, so I looked ahead at the lessons for the following Sunday. When I did I learned that I had a choice to make. I could write on the First Sunday after Christmas or I could write on the Feast of the Holy Name. I asked Sara which she’d choose and she didn’t hesitate. “Holy Name. We never get to hear those lessons on a Sunday. I’ve always wanted to hear a good sermon on Holy Name.” That felt right.

So I determined that I would look at the lessons for Holy Name this morning. Then, when I got up today I went to the fitness center in our apartment complex to do my penance on the elliptical. (It’s not really *that* bad.) Many mornings while I’m doing my exercise I put on some earbuds and listen to worship music. Contemporary Christian worship music. Not the Christian pop you hear on KLove, but songs you’d hear in church, focused on worship. Usually they’re recorded live as part of a worship service, so there’s a different energy to them. (The same difference as there’d be if I could be talking directly to you, rather than sitting in my study, which I really miss.)

When I listen to music, I let Amazon Music pick the songs. Instead of putting on an album or a playlist I’ve assembled, I choose a “station” that plays music they think is *like* a given artist. Today I started a station built around a group from Redding California called Jesus Culture. The station always starts with a song by the artist you’ve chosen

but then it goes off in its own direction. I use this station often and I rarely hear the same songs twice in a week or more.

So Amazon started me off with a song from Jesus Culture that I don't remember because the very next song began with the singer (I didn't know him or the song.) singing, "I just want to speak the Name of Jesus over every heart and every mind..." And it went on from there, declaring the might and the love and the healing and the power of the Name of Jesus over every aspect of our lives. The song is entitled "I speak Jesus," (by Charity Gayle) and I'll link to a YouTube video of the same recording somewhere toward the end of this Divergence.

I don't put a lot of stock in coincidence. I've never heard that song on this station before, and I can't buy that it popped up on the morning I was preparing to write on the Feast of the Holy Name out of sheer chance. The song and the blessing it pours out over the hearer are wonderful. I was really lifted up as I began my time on the exercise machine, but it also made me impatient to get back to my keyboard and start writing (what I'd write I still didn't know, and I'm not sure I do yet) so I did cut my time in the exercise center a bit shorter than I'd planned.

I'm glad I didn't cut it too short, though, because about two-thirds of the way through my routine on the elliptical there came another song. This one I'd heard two or three times before. It's called "The Blessing" and it's by Cody Carnes and Kari Jobe, singing with the musicians from Elevation Worship in Charlotte. The lyrics of the song are basically a slightly modernized version of the words from the Aaronic Blessing. I hadn't looked at the readings I'd be writing on this morning. I did not know that the Aaronic Blessing is our text from Numbers for Holy Name. When I sat down to assemble the readings and figure out what to write, I was, well, gobsmacked.

If the Lord isn't saying anything more to me than this, it's that Holy Name was the right choice for this week's Divergence. It's going to be very difficult for me to avoid getting preachy in this one. Not in a bad way (I hope) but in a "shout it from the rooftops" kind of way. I'm just too excited about what's burning inside of me right now, so forgive me if I drift away from the Bible study that is the primary purpose of the Divergence on the Lectionary from time to time!

Okay, you've been warned. Let's move on to the lessons!

First Reading

I've known the Aaronic Blessing for decades. I committed it to memory a long time ago but I never once took note of the verse that follows immediately after the blessing that

Moses tells Aaron and his sons to speak over the people. “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” Aaron and his sons are to speak the Holy Name of God over the people. “The Lord,” the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, over and over again. A name so holy it wasn’t to be spoken aloud is to be spoken over the people, and in that name is the power of blessing.

You’ve probably read elsewhere about the power of a name in Jewish thought, the way it conveys something of the essence of the person to whom it points. I don’t think I need to belabor the importance of a name, then, especially when the name is the Name of God. To speak the Name of God over the people in blessing is to say that to say that it is the essence of God to bless, that His very nature is to bless.

And to speak that name over God’s children is to release unimaginable power of blessing over them. I’ve known this blessing, spoken these words over congregations for years and years, and only today am I becoming aware of the canon I was firing in the church. Except that this canon seems to be loaded with confetti, or glitter, or something that scatters through the atmosphere of the room and settles on the people bringing healing and restoration, courage and strength. Not everyone will receive it, but it’s there, in the power of the Name.

Second Reading(s)

For the feast of the Holy Name we have a choice of two readings from Paul. One from Galatians, one from Philippians. I have to admit that at first I wasn’t quite sure why the reading from Galatians was included here. Not that it isn’t a powerful reading, only that it doesn’t seem to connect as clearly with the theme of the day as does the one from Philippians.

But then I read it again. Well, actually three or four times before I saw it.

There isn’t a specific mention of a “name,” but Paul does say that because God’s Son came and dwelt among us, we are adopted as “sons.” (My apologies to the women reading here. You and I both know that you are included in Paul’s word “sons” [which is why I put it in parentheses] just as I am included when God speaks of me as His “bride.”) The point is that Jesus’ coming among us as a “son” has brought us to that place of being “adopted” children, given the Father’s Name.

I hope I’m not going over ground that is too well trodden here, but it’s worth repeating, even so, that “adoption” in this letter of Paul doesn’t refer to the taking in of an orphan in the way that we might understand it. In Roman society all sons were “adopted” by their father when they reached an age where the Father thought him ready to accept the

responsibility of bearing his father's name. It wasn't a specific age, set by custom, but a decision of the father, which is why Paul speaks of it this way, "but he is under guardians and managers *until the date set by his father*. (Galatians 4:2, ESV) I think this distinction is important because this Roman practice (different from Jewish and Greek customs where the dates of adulthood were set, 12 for Jews, 18 for Greeks) that Paul cites has no sense of inevitability to it. It is the father's decision, his choice.

This reading, then, might connect even more strongly to the Aaron's blessing from Numbers than the reading from Philippians we'll tackle next. Paul lays out for us the way that in Jesus God has spoken His Name over us and declared us His sons and daughters, blessing us.

Philippians

We have as a second possible choice for the second reading the much more familiar passage from Philippians 2. It is so familiar because it is read on the Sunday of the Passion for all three lectionary years, plus (in a slightly longer form) in Proper 21 of Year A.

In this reading we hear Paul exhort the Philippians to "have this mind among yourselves that is yours in Christ Jesus. I'd like to look more closely at that for a moment and notice a couple of things. First, what he means by "this mind." For that we need to go back a few verses. Just before this verse Paul says to his readers/hearers,

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."
(Philippians 2:1-4, ESV)

This is what it looks like to Paul to "have this mind among yourselves." Always, always putting others first. When I read my own words there, I recoil a little. I know how unhealthy it can be to "always, always put others first." I'm not sure I've ever succeeded fully in that, but I've known some people who did, and I wouldn't recommend their brand of humility to you or to anyone. There is a humility that comes from believing yourself worthless, a humility that denies the value God has placed on you. I don't think that's what Paul is talking about. That brings me to the second bit I'd like to point to in that sentence, "have this mind among yourselves *that is yours in Christ Jesus*."

First, this mind that we're to have among ourselves is already ours. Ours in Christ Jesus. Second, it's ours *because we're in Christ Jesus*. This is a part of our inheritance in Him. The humility that Paul commends comes to us through Jesus. Then Paul goes on to set before us the ultimate example of humility. Setting aside equality with God, Jesus took on human form, even that of a slave, and died as a slave. But He surely didn't do it because He thought He had no worth. He did it because He knew exactly how the Father regarded Him. And how the Father regarded us.

I think we are invited to live into the humility that comes with knowing precisely who we are in the Father's eyes. As we step into the identities bestowed on us by the Father through Jesus Christ, it will become second nature to put others first. Not that I have mastered this, or even come close, but there may be moments.

And in the moments where we do manage to "have the same mind among ourselves," we lay claim to the name that God has placed upon us as adopted sons and daughters. It works rather backwards for us than it did for Jesus. We are given the names "Redeemed" and "Beloved" and we humble ourselves *because* we now know who we are. He was given His Name, the Name that is above every name *because* He humbled Himself. "*Therefore* God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name..."

Jesus isn't exalted because He conquered sin and death, and restored us to fellowship with the Father. Jesus is exalted because of the *manner in which He did it*. It was the *way* in which He saved us that sets His Name above all other names. This is the reason the angels sing and and shout His praises day and night.

I am uncomfortably reminded of a favorite saying of Heidi Baker's, one that I'd forgotten for too long. She loves to remind us to "go lower." Whatever the trouble, whatever the obstacle, the route beyond it is to "go lower." If ever there were a sister in Christ whose example we could all stand to follow, it would be Heidi's. If you don't know who she is, she's worth looking up, Heidi Baker and Iris Ministries.

But not because we're worthless, right? Not to earn a name, but rather because we are in the Father's eyes, of inestimable value. Because He has already adopted us, given us a name in Jesus.

Gospel Text

I had to chuckle when I read the Gospel lesson appointed for the Feast of the Holy Name. Basically we get the last portion of the Gospel from Christmas II with an extra

verse tagged onto the end, “And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

Because that’s all we get about the naming of Jesus. He received His name eight days after He was born, on the day that He was circumcised. That’s it. We have a whole feast day for one verse. As one writer on this feast day reminded me, this used to be the Feast of the Circumcision, but being as “squeamish” as we are, they changed it to Holy Name. It falls “eight days” after Christmas. One week in our calendars, because the Jewish way of counting days included the day on which you started counting. (That’s why Sunday is three days after Friday in Holy Week.)

From a Bible study point of view that one sentence carries more interest than you might think. It is yet another mark of Luke’s concern to root his Gentile Christian readers’ understanding of their experience of Jesus in His Jewishness. Matthew doesn’t tell us about this, but for his congregation that would have assumed. Of course Jesus’ parents got Him circumcised on the eighth day. But this practice would have been foreign to Luke’s readers, probably even repugnant. Luke isn’t letting his readers off the hook here. Jesus was Jewish, *very* Jewish. At the same time, recalling this in his version of the Gospels says to the Jewish Christians of the time, “See? We haven’t forgotten our roots. What we’re about here isn’t something all that different from what you’re about.” We’re not in Year C any longer, so I won’t have opportunities to go back to this soon, but keep in mind that Luke is as concerned to show however many Jewish Christian readers as he has that the objectionable inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian family was not solely the work of Paul, but was promulgated and endorsed by no less Jewish leaders than Peter and James.

All that from one little sentence!