

# The Feast of the Holy Name

January 1, 2012

*Numbers 6:22-27*

*Psalm 8*

*Philippians 2:5-11*

*Luke 2:15-21*

*In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Of course the name isn't really Jesus. Jesus is a much later translation of a Greek word, phonetically yesus, which is itself a Greek translation of the Hebrew, Yeshua – the same as Joshua – which means “God delivers” or “God saves.”

In the Gospel of Luke the angel Gabriel tells Mary to name her child Jesus; in Matthew an angel tells Joseph that the name of the child is to be Jesus. So it is a name chosen and given by God, predicting, as did many Jewish names, the child's future. The future will be “deliverance” – deliverance of whom, deliverance from what?

If you had been there, you would have had an easy answer to those two questions. Your quick answer would be deliverance of the Jews of course, deliverance from Roman domination. It would be so obvious to you that you would look no further.

Jesus didn't do that. Instead Jesus is there to deliver the Jews from themselves, from the suffocating entanglement of laws and rules and rituals that had, over time, stifled and strangled Jewish spirituality and the Jews' relationship to God.

Jesus is the action of God to restore that relationship.

The reading from Numbers speaks of a bright springtime in that relationship. God will put His name on Israel, claim them for His own people and bless them, making Israel the heir to His kingdom. All that had been God's volition, God's doing; Israel needed only to accept it. Then it became complicated.

Little by little, layer upon layer, they built a wall of rules and practices between God and themselves. The breaking down of that wall was the deliverance that Israel needed, that God promised, and that Jesus brought.

This time that deliverance isn't proclaimed first to priests and kings; here the angels sing to shepherds. God knows that announcing it to Moses and Aaron and Aaron's sons, the priests and Levites who were to build that wall, hadn't worked out well. This time angels proclaim the good news to the other end of the social order, a young mother and a carpenter in a small town, shepherds in the fields, the poor and the powerless. They have no agenda or position; they can only proclaim the wonder of the Incarnation to all the world.

That is the world into which Jesus is born. Paul tells the Philippians that in Christ Jesus God "emptied Himself" to be born a human, a very humble human, living and dying as a human. In that living and dying, Jesus is one with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds.

It is in His sacrifice that they, and we, are delivered.

*In His Holy Name.*