

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“In Jesus’ Name”

January 3, 2010

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### **Numbers 6:22-27**

*22 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>23</sup>Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,*

*<sup>24</sup>The LORD bless you and keep you;*

*<sup>25</sup>the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;*

*<sup>26</sup>the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

*27 So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.*

### **Luke 2:15-21**

*15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

*21 After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

Boys, once they approach their teenaged years, have a peculiar talent for giving their peers colorful nicknames. In a few cases, these nicknames last for life. But usually they stick around for just a couple of years to be uncovered again and laughed about twenty years later at high school reunions. Consider some of the nicknames my classmates owned: Roach, Itchy, Carcass (Itchy and Carcass were brothers), Gopher, Boom Boom, Buff, Fluff, Mugsy, Red, Squish, and Pigstinks. When you hear nicknames like these, you don’t need to see the faces of the boys to imagine what they looked like. Certain names tell it all.

When the 1960’s ended, San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district reverted to high rent and many hippies moved down the coast to Santa Cruz. They had children and got married also, in no particular order. But they didn’t name their children Melissa or Brent. People in the mountains around Santa Cruz grew accustomed to their children playing Frisbee with friends like little Time Warp or Spring Fever. Eventually Moonbeam, Earth, Love, and Precious Promise all ended up in the public schools.

That's when the kindergarten teachers first met little Fruit Stand. Every fall, according to tradition, parents bravely applied nametags to their children, kissed them goodbye, and sent them off on the school bus. So it was for young Fruit Stand. The teachers thought the boy's name to be quite odd, but given some of the other names they had heard, they tried to make the best of it. They asked, "Would you like to play with the blocks, Fruit Stand?" And later in the day they inquired, "Fruit Stand, would you like to have a snack now?" He accepted hesitantly. By the end of the day Fruit Stand's name didn't seem much odder than Heather's or Sun Ray's.

At dismissal time, the teachers led the children out to the buses. "Fruit Stand, do you know which one is your bus?" Fruit Stand didn't know the answer. That wasn't strange because he really hadn't answered the teachers all day. Some kids are very shy like that on the first day of school. That is why the teachers had instructed the parents to write the name of their children's bus stop on the reverse side of the nametags, so the teachers would know. The teacher turned over young Fruit Stand's nametag and there neatly printed was the word, "Anthony."

What is in a name? Think about it. A name represents a whole being. It is a tag for an entire personality. Our name is really us. It is our identity, the essence of who we are. I think of the struggle that Laura and I went through to find a name for our second daughter. I wanted to name her after a family member. Laura thought that the names of our family members were too old fashioned. We wanted a name that was somewhat different but not so different as to be embarrassing. Finally, I decided to name the child after me, that is to give her my initials but with her own name. That pleased me. I found in a name book that Amelia meant hard working and industrious. That pleased her mother. And so Amelia it was to be!

Yes, a name carries with it a certain power. In a *New York Times* article, Allen Gurganos, author of *The Last Surviving Confederate Widow Tells All*, wrote, "It hasn't been that long since we have stopped naming our daughters Hope and Faith and started naming them Buffy and Tiffany. We don't know why?" Certainly Gurganos must believe that a name conveys an essence to a person who carried it, something to be lived out and passed on.

A name has yet another power. To say a name is to call forth memories of a person's presence or to make that person almost present with us. When someone mentions to me the name Al Kaline, I can picture the great Detroit Tiger in the batter's box or in right field making a great play. When we mention a name in prayer, we actually place that person in our presence and their concern in our prayerful hearts. When you spoke of a loved one during your family Christmas celebrations, I would imagine that your hearts were warmed and many memories were shared.

When we drop a name during our conversations, or when we attach a name to our actions, we give what we do a greater sense of legitimacy. When I officiate at a wedding, I proclaim that I am doing it in the name of the state and of the church. When I distribute the elements of the Lord's Supper, I do it in the name of Jesus who first shared of his body and blood. In our worship, we pray in the name of Jesus. When we do this, our prayers gain special significance because it means we pray in the spirit of Jesus, in the same fashion in which he prayed.

January 1 is a day in which the Christian church observes as the Feast of the Name of Jesus. It is an observance usually ignored by Protestants, perhaps because of

the celebration of the New Year and the observance of Epiphany. But perhaps it is good for us to examine the meaning of the name Jesus.

Consider the Scripture lesson of this day. The gospel of Luke has only one little verse concerning the naming of Jesus. Luke says "when the time came for the baby to be circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name which the angel had given him before he was conceived." The gospel here makes an important point. Jesus' name was given to him not by his parents, not by his family, not by his friends. Mary and Joseph didn't have to use a book of names from the Nazareth City Library or the internet. The angel who first spoke to Mary gave the name to him. If only it would have been that easy for Amelia! While the gospel of Matthew emphasizes that the name means salvation, the writer of Luke prefers to consider instead simply the source of the name.

In our religious tradition, a name is important. Today we must consider the importance of the name Jesus to us. Ancient Israel was said to be a people, "called by the name of the Lord." In like mind, Christians then would be people who gather in the name of Jesus. Embracing the name of Jesus and serving in his name, our actions gain special power and significance. In Jesus' name, acts that might be ordinary elsewhere, but acquire new meaning here. Fellowship might be ordinary at a social gathering or a service club meeting, but here fellowship in Jesus' name is supposed to be special. Our singing in the shower might cause dogs to howl but when we sing here in Jesus' name, our singing is heavenly. Washing dishes or trimming shrubs at home may be unfulfilling but our labor here in Jesus' name should be meaningful. Laughter in some places may seem silly and pointless but our play and laughter here in Jesus' name needs to be invigorating. No good human act, no matter how mundane, is exempt for the possibility of God's presence when the act is done in the name of Jesus. That is the power of his name for those who call themselves Christians. Things done sincerely and faithfully in Jesus' name become holy.

The New Year is a pretty good time to consider the power of the name of Jesus. We gather this morning in the promise of a new year, still recalling the promise of God born in the manger of Bethlehem. The New Year is an appropriate time to remember that all we do in a community of faith, and all we do as people of faith, is done in the name of Jesus. We should consider not only the momentous and the great, but we should remember even the simplest of things. Our work and our play, our meals and our cleaning, our driving in busy rush hours and our waiting in line at the grocery store, our business meetings and our social conversations, our waking and our rising- in all of these things, everything that we do should be done in the name of Jesus. We would pray that God might bless us so that this new year might be one we would live each hour in Jesus' name.

That in itself is a very awesome thought. Because you are a follower of Christ, you are an incarnation of Jesus in the world. Yet chances are, most of us are Christians because we have met another who labored in life in the name of Jesus. We have been blessed by the example of another in order that we can bless others in Jesus' name.

Author Lovette Weems tells a story about a London priest named John. Father John felt called to work with the city's poor but sadly he was never assigned to a parish in that part of the city. Instead he decided to withdraw from the priesthood and take work as a street sweeper. Each day he worked side-by-side with the other sweepers. They grew to love him, never knowing that he was really a priest. One day, one of the

most popular street sweepers became ill and died. The others were shocked, not knowing that he was sick. "If only we had known," they said to one another, "we might have been able to do something. Now we will never be able to do anything for him." John suggested that they could give him a funeral. The street sweepers replied that they wouldn't know where to begin. They didn't even know a priest. It was then that John revealed his identity. On the day of the funeral, hundreds of street sweepers filled a local Catholic Church. Father John appeared in all of his robes and led a magnificent funeral. Toward the end of the mass, one rather befuddled street sweeper stood up in front of the congregation and shouted, "I didn't know that John was a priest! I wonder, are there any more priests among us?"

The confused street sweeper's question is really a profound one for us all. Are there others named Jesus among us? In 2010, whether your name is John or Bob, Martha or Mary, you bear another name that is infinitely more telling to the world—the name of Jesus. By that name you are able to do all you can do so that others might see Jesus coming into our world. By that name you will be able to deal with others with gentleness and compassion. By that name you will be able to find meaning in your everyday tasks.